Back to spool:
The amazing reel-to-reel tape revival

Fun and finesse:
Q Acoustics' Concept 30 compact standmount

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 486 March 2022

BUYING GUIDE
100+ Essential Components
p111

COOL CANS!

GROUP TEST
Six stylish £350 wireless noise-cancelling headphones battle it out

HOORAY FOR THE SEVENTIES!
A retro approval of Garrard's 125SB belt-driven turntable

SHIPSHAPE
Bowers & Wilkins' new Zeppelin speaker's a flier

TINY TITAN
Fyne Audio's F500SP bookshelf speaker wows!

"On song, over air..."
Mission's LX Connect wireless speaker system is a confident all-rounder

NEWS SPECIAL:
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"BARNSTORMER!"

NAD's C 700 streaming amp showered with superlatives

TOP OF THE GOTHS

The wonderful, weird and wonky world of The Cure

"GREAT SOUND, NICE PRICE"

Master & Dynamics' MW08 classy affordable earbuds

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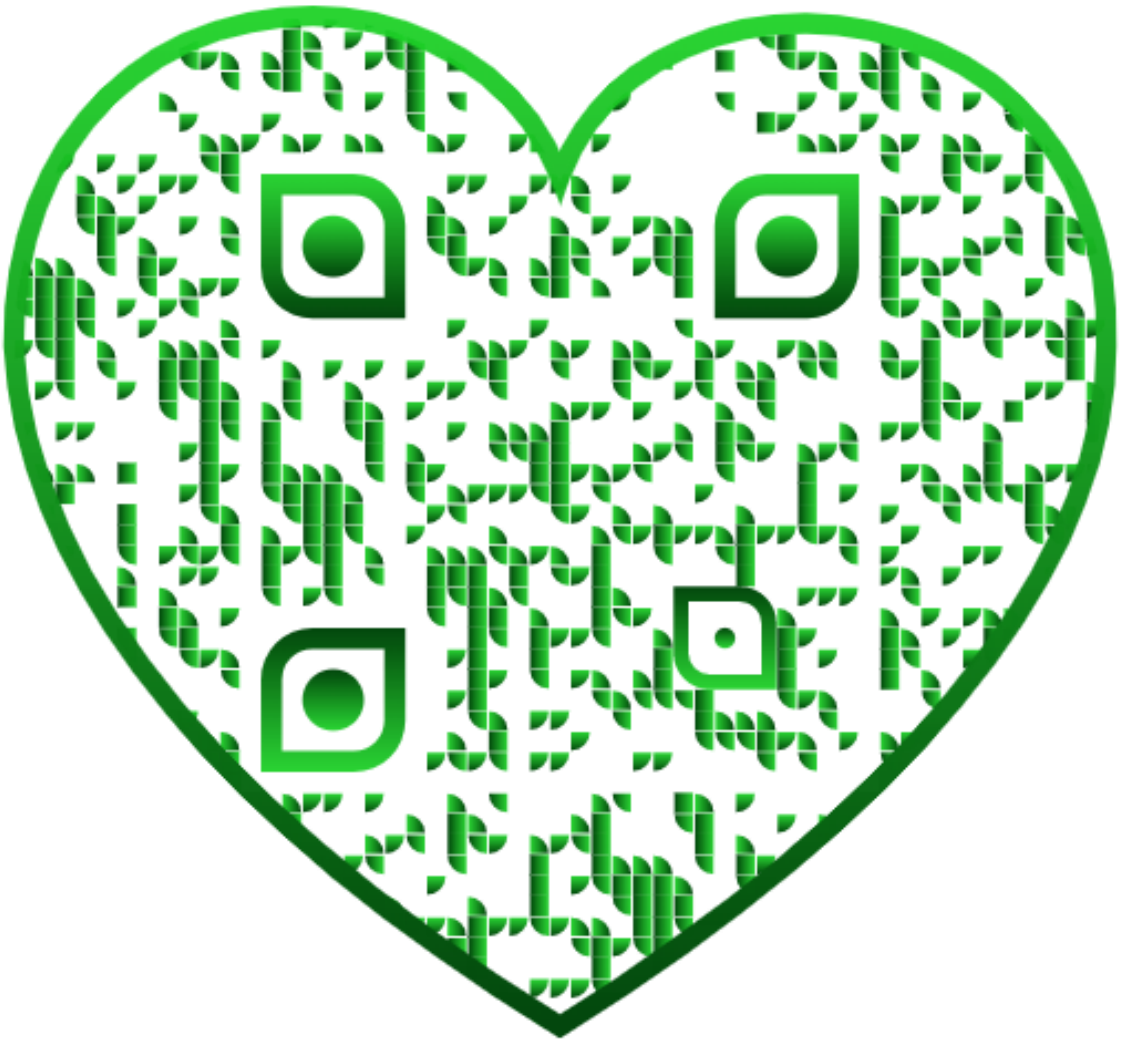

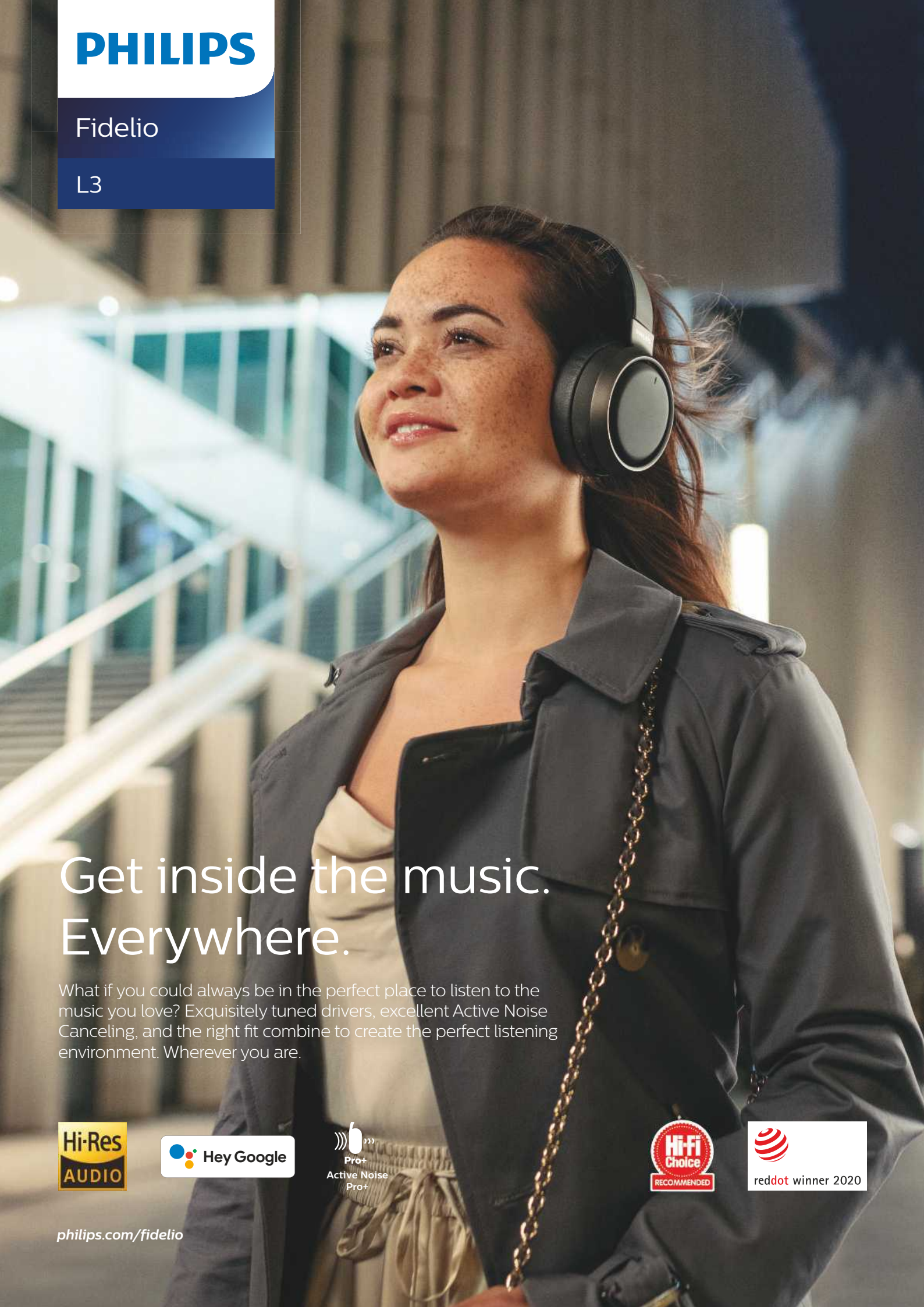
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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE: Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

RECOMMENDED: Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

GROUP TEST WINNER: Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!

The inspiration for this month's *Group Test* came on New Year's Eve when the conversation about intended resolutions among family and friends took an unusual twist away from the customary goals of giving up the booze, going to the gym, climbing a mountain, learning a new language *etc.* to being happier and trying to ignore the prevalence of negativity all around us.

So it occurred to me – now nicknamed Sunny Steve – that, as there are times when it seems the only world worth living in is your own, it would be fitting to look at wireless noise-cancelling cans to help you disappear into your own headspace and get blissfully lost in the opera, podcast or R&B playlist of your choice.

As David Vivian notes: "If we accept that the direction of convergence tech travel is signposted by the rise of, say, the smartwatch, perhaps it isn't unreasonable of today's on-trend music lovers to expect an all-singing hi-fi system to come in a zip-up pouch... for some, it's the only stereo kit they'll ever need." All at £350 or under, there's surely bound to be a model that suits your needs and takes your fancy.

Elsewhere you'll find sage advice on decluttering your record collection, insight into the reel-to-reel tape revival and news about a fantastic array of new products just on the market. What's not to like?

Steve Sutherland Editor

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Hi-Fi Choice

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Never miss an issue – turn to p68 for our latest subs offer

Picture credit: Ben Houdijk/Shutterstock.com

Second coming

Complete make-over for AE's popular entry-level UK speakers

PRICE: £230-£600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ACOUSTIC-ENERGY.CO.UK

ACOUSTIC ENERGY HAS redesigned, upgraded and relaunched its entry-level 100 Series loudspeakers in the shape of the AE100² bookshelf, AE109² floorstander, AE108² active subwoofer and AE107² centre (for home cinema setups). Meanwhile, a new AE120² flagship floorstander is due to follow in the future.

The company says the design brief was to: "try and maintain the compact dimensions and sleek appearance of the previous 100 Series, but offer a more mature, refined and bigger sound with greater bandwidth and power".

What this means is that the 100mm paper cone has been increased in size to a 127mm driver utilising a four-layer voice coil with flux rings, while high-density fibreboard (HDF) is now being used – which AE claims is: "unheard of at this price-point and usually limited to the very high end".

What HDF does, AE reveals, is provide the option of using thinner cabinet walls with no loss in acoustic performance, the mass and stiffness of the 15mm HDF being the same as the previous 18mm MDF. The result of this is a 15 percent increase in cabinet size, but a 30 percent increase

The high-density fibreboard used is usually limited to the very high end

in internal volume gained over the previous 100 Series speakers.

Also new to the series is a 25mm soft-dome tweeter and waveguide, which was developed to match the bass driver and although the new 100s retain similar lines to the older generation, AE says they're cleaner and more refined – the latest design including improved cabinet veneer finishes along with a dedicated flared trim on the bass port and higher-grade binding posts.

The AE100² standmount pairs the aforementioned 25mm soft-dome tweeter with a 130mm mid/bass driver, measures 165 x 290 x 250mm (WxHxD) and weighs 9.2kg. The AE109² floorstander adds an additional 130mm mid/bass driver with a 2.5-way crossover, is 165 x 860 x 250mm (WxHxD) and weighs 16kg. The three-way AE120² has the same tweeter as its sibling, two 130mm bass drivers and a 130mm dedicated midrange driver. Its dimensions are 165 x 950 x 250mm (WxHxD, including the plinth) and weighs in at 19kg.

All speakers are available in Black and Walnut vinyl veneer, while the AE100² also comes in white. ▶

The AE100² (white), AE108², AE100² (walnut), AE107² centre and AE109² (clockwise from above)

Upping the ante

New, improved MKII range offerings from Japan

PRICE: £650-£1,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ROTEL.COM

JAPANESE SPECIALIST ROTEL is upping its output to celebrate its 60th anniversary with the arrival of the A12MKII (bottom) integrated and CD14MKII (middle) and RCD-1572MKII (top) CD players, following the recent launch of the A14MKII (*HFC* 480), RA-1572MKII and RA-1592MKII amps and RC-1572MKII and RC-1590MKII preamps.

The company explains that: "the new models benefit from innovations and improvements to the circuit designs and enhancement to critical audio components, resulting in exceptional performance, improved accuracy and greater acoustic detail. The soundstage of the new models delivers wider and more genuine presentation of the music with increased depth and natural expression."

All models feature a new Texas Instruments 32-bit DAC, power supply refinements, precision acoustic coupling capacitors and circuit board layout isolation intended to lower the noise floor and reduce distortion.

The A12MKII costs £950 and includes a new DAC, digital processor and digital interface chipset with 12 complimentary changes to the power amplifier. The MKII CD players boast upgraded CD drive mechanisms, new CD controller chipsets, an improved DAC and tuned critical acoustic components. The CD14MKII (£650) and RCD-1572MKII (£1,000) have RCA and coaxial digital outputs, allowing them to be utilised as a CD transport supporting off-board digital-to-analogue processing. Meanwhile, the RCD-1572MKII also includes a fully-balanced, fully-differential XLR output claimed to reject any external noise and lower RF interference.

The A12MKII, CD14MKII and RCD-1572MKII are available in either silver or black finishes.

Tech-savvy

New CD receiver and noise-cancelling wireless over-ear headphones from Japan

PRICE: £300-£850 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** TECHNICS.COM

TECHNICS HAS LAUNCHED its new SA-C600 Compact Network CD Receiver as part of its Premium C600 Series, joining the SB-C600 Compact Speaker System launched back in September.

"The SA-C600 is a significant add-on to the Technics portfolio, filling the gap between all-in-one compact speaker systems such as the C70MK2 and true separate component systems such as the C700 and G700 systems," according to the company. "This enables a performance level not possible with all-in-one solutions, yet without the need to find space for lots of components within the home".

The new SA-C600 makes use of full-digital amplification technology based on the company's JENO Engine and boasts a top-loading CD design, quoted power output of 2x 60W into 4ohm and low noise power supply left and right channel individual Space Tune room compensation with additional 'In-shelf' option. Connectivity includes a moving-magnet phono input for turntable connection, subwoofer out, Chromecast built-in for multi-room capability and access to streaming services, with Spotify Connect, Tidal, Deezer and Amazon Music support. Internet Radio/DAB/FM, AirPlay 2 and MQA decoding also come as standard. The SA-C600 comes in silver or black.

Also just released is Technics' £300 EAH-A800 noise-cancelling wireless over-ear headphone boasting a newly developed 40mm dynamic driver with a free edge diaphragm in the dome. The company claims its Acoustic Control Chamber: "accurately controls air flow to enhance the performance of the driver for precise bass and rich spatial expression. Further, use of thin-film polymer multi-layer capacitors – a technology used in Technics' high-grade audio amplifiers – facilitates a stable current through the audio circuitry, which limits distortion and generates high-quality sound." The EAH-A800 employs Bluetooth with LDAC processing and has eight mics on the left and right earcups. Four operate in tandem to pick up the voice, while the other four activate noise cancelling simultaneously from both sides to reduce surrounding interference. There's a choice of two modes: Natural Ambient, which allows the user to pay attention to surrounding noise while listening to music or making calls and Attention, in which users should still be able to hear airport and train announcements.

Multipoint pairing allows connection to two Bluetooth devices at the same time and the battery provides approximately 50 hours of music listening time.

The 3D earpads feature a curved design to apply uniform pressure to the entire ear and use a memory foam material to distribute pressure and ensure a secure fit. The inner diameter of the earpad has been enlarged to wrap around the ear and the headphones themselves can be stored in the bundled compact carry case.

Dapper desktop

New headphone amp from A&K

PRICE: £2,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ASTELLKERN.CO.UK

ASTELL&KERN HAS INTRODUCED its new desktop headphone amp with digital audio player (DAP) capabilities – the ACRO CA1000, which features a four-step gain level that drives high-impedance headphones with a 15Vrms output or below. It boasts 3.5mm and 6.35mm unbalanced, and 2.5mm and 4.4mm balanced headphone outputs, plus an array of digital/analogue inputs, while the onboard ESS ES9068AS Quad-DAC supports high-resolution audio playback up to 32-bit/384kHz and native DSD512.

Using Astell&Kern's patented TERATON ALPHA Sound Solution technology, it has Bluetooth 5.0 with aptX HD and LDAC codecs supported. Its 8,400mAh built-in battery provides up to 10.5 hours playback, while USB-PD fast charging means that anyone with a charger that supports USB Power Delivery (USB-PD) can experience improved charging times – a one hour blast provides 50 percent battery, while it takes 2.5 hours for a full charge. A green light on the ACRO CA1000 will indicate when USB-PD fast charging is active.

The ACRO CA1000 boasts 256GB built-in memory that can be expanded up to 1TB via a microSD card slot. Elsewhere, Replay Gain functionality automatically and uniformly adjusts volume playback from sound sources up to 24-bit/192 kHz.

A BT Sink function connects the ACRO CA1000 to an external device, such as a smartphone, via Bluetooth, and alongside dual-band wi-fi support, the headphone amplifier features AK File Drop for wireless file transfers. Users can wirelessly transfer files through a PC, smartphone or FTP programme located on the same network. Control is made easy thanks to the inclusion of a 4.1in touchscreen, which can be angled up to 60°.

The ACRO CA1000 measures 105 x 45 x 149mm (WxHxD), weighs approximately 9.9g and comes in a moon silver aluminium finish.

Wireless Fidelity
Has a New Champion

The Expert Imaging & Sound Association of as many as sixty specialist magazines from around the world has honoured System Audio with its Best Wireless Speaker Award two years running! Located at Roskilde, the music city of Denmark, System Audio has received more than 150 awards for sound, design and innovation since 1984.

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DAC's the way to do it!

New addition to iFi Audio's Signature range

PRICE: £350 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** IFI-AUDIO.COM

IFI AUDIO IS expanding its ZEN Signature range with the new ZEN One Signature. The company describes it as: "a universal DAC" owing to its increased input options. The ZEN One Signature takes the DAC stage from the ZEN DAC V2, adds optical and coaxial inputs alongside the USB port and Bluetooth technology from the ZEN Blue V2. The result, the company says: "is a pure DAC (with no built-in headphone amp or volume control) that serves as a home audio hub for all your digital devices, from smartphones and tablets to PCs and Macs, disc players and audio servers to TVs and games consoles".

The DAC's digital engine is based around a Burr-Brown chipset and involves an XMOS chip that processes the audio data received via the USB and optical/coaxial digital inputs. Jitter-eradication technologies have also been applied to the digital stage, including the latest generation of iFi's Global Master Timing (GMT) femto-precision clock and intelligent memory buffer.

iFi says the ZEN One Signature's hi-res audio credentials include 32-bit/384kHz PCM over USB (192kHz over coaxial/optical), up to DSD256 and single and double-speed DXD. Thanks to the Burr-Brown DAC chip's four-channel True Native design, PCM and DSD take separate pathways – which enables both file types to remain bit-perfect' in their native form right through to analogue conversion. MQA is also supported, with full decoding up to 384kHz. Using Qualcomm's latest four-core QCC5100 Bluetooth processing chip, every current high-definition Bluetooth audio format is supported, including aptX Adaptive and aptX HD, LDAC and HWA/LHDC. Other codecs covered include regular aptX and aptX Low Latency, AAC and SBC. The ZEN One Signature is Bluetooth v5.1-compliant and as many as eight paired Bluetooth source devices can be stored in its memory, making it easy to quickly switch from one device to another.

Power can be supplied over USB from a connected device – a laptop, for example – or directly from the mains via an AC/DC adapter. Optimum performance is provided by iFi's ultra-low noise iPower2 DC power supply, which is included in the price (£69 when purchased separately).

The ZEN One Signature sports the same 158 x 35 x 100mm (WxHxD) aluminium chassis as the rest of the ZEN range, finished in Deep Space Blue – the colour iFi uses to differentiate its Signature-level models – rather than the grey of the regular ZEN Series devices. This is complemented by dark grey front and rear panels (silver-coloured on the standard versions) and blue controls.

At the front are buttons for powering up/down and switching between the USB, optical, coaxial and Bluetooth inputs, alongside colour-changing LEDs to indicate audio format and sample rate. A further button switches the LEDs on or off, as well as activating the Bluetooth pairing mode.

Around the back resides an asynchronous USB Type B port, alongside optical and coaxial inputs – the latter doubling as a digital out. RCA analogue outputs are joined by a balanced 4.4mm out, enabling fully balanced connectivity with a suitably equipped amplifier. iFi makes a balanced 4.4mm-to-stereo XLR cable, ideal for connecting the ZEN One Signature to any amplifier with XLR inputs.

THE BEAUTY OF SOUND

INTRODUCING
THE NEW ZEPPELIN

Bowers & Wilkins

BOWERSWILKINS.COM

Pride of the Mark

New 'phones and limited-edition amp from high-class Californian outfit

PRICE: TBC **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MARKLEVINSON.COM

US COMPANY MARK Levinson has unveiled its new N° 5909 headphone, a high-resolution wireless adaptive active noise-cancellation model – the first portable offering from the brand more usually associated with its home hi-fi systems.

Boasting up to 34 hours of playback time and 30 hours with adaptive active noise cancellation turned on, this design was crafted with luxury comfort in mind. The N° 5909 is constructed with core aluminium components, a leather headband and replaceable leather ear cushions. It comes with an accompanying hard-shell carrying case that also stores bundled cables and an airplane adapter. The N° 5909 delivers what the company calls: "reference-quality sound" via 40mm Beryllium-coated drivers and features Bluetooth 5.1 with LDAC, AAC and aptX. The Adaptive Active Noise Cancellation boasts three modes for premium sound isolation and Ambient Aware for situational awareness of the user's immediate surroundings.

The Mark Levinson N° 5909 headphone comes in Pearl Black, Ice Pewter and Radiant Red with UK distribution and pricing to be confirmed soon.

Also just released by the California company is an extremely limited-edition pair of monoaural amplifiers. The ML-50 amplifier package – an exclusive creation limited to only 100 pairs globally – is named after the very first Mark Levinson power amplifier – the ML-2 – produced from 1977 to 1986. The N° 20 power amplifier and its updated models the N° 20.5 and N° 20.6 produced between 1986 and 1995 inspired the large front panel handles found on the ML-50. The N° 33 (1994-2003) and N° 33H (1997-2007) reference amplifiers sparked the idea of the outrigger feet that provide the solid foundation for the ML-50 chassis. The concept of the glass front panel and red backlit Mark Levinson logo on the ML-50 is lifted from the N° 53 reference amplifier that was built from 2008 to 2019.

Light up your life

Designed with a clear glass top cover that showcases the internal circuit designs, the ML-50 features internal LED lighting, which can be switched between red, white and off.

The solid aluminium front design also features a large black glass panel insert with a red backlit LED Mark Levinson logo and a machined aluminium standby power button encircled with a red LED light ring. The power supply and audio circuits of the N° 536 platform have been enhanced to increase the high-voltage supply (voltage gain and pre-driver circuits) capacitance by 50 percent (from 8,800uF to 13,200uF) – a 20 percent increase in the capacitance of the main high-current supply (169,200uF to 206,800uF) plus reconfigured Schottky rectifiers for a lower-impedance path from the transformer to the filter caps. The company says distortion has been lowered by doubling the output stage bias resulting in more than quadruple the amount of Class A power: 20W into 8ohm. The overall Class AB power has also increased to 425W into 8ohm.

The N° 5909 headphone (above) and the limited-edition ML-50 monoaural amps (below)

As a fully balanced design, the ML-50 offers balanced XLR and single-ended RCA audio jack inputs and two sets of Mark Levinson Hurricane binding post speaker terminals, while Ethernet, serial and 12V trigger connections provide complete external control.

Each ML-50 amplifier package includes two monaural amplifiers and an accessory kit that consists of two 3m power cords, a microfibre polishing cloth, white gloves and owner's documentation.

The Mark Levinson ML-50 limited edition amplifier package will be available from select retailers in Q4 of 2022 at a retail price of $50,000 per system pair (UK price still tbc).

Meter made

New affordable headphone from bass master

PRICE: £69 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** SOUNDTECH.CO.UK

THE METERS BY Ashdown NOVU-1 Studio Reference headphone is now available from Ashdown Engineering via Sound Technology. Ashdown is the company that makes bass guitar amps for many of the world's top acts, including U2, Foo Fighters, The Who, Pink Floyd, Sir Paul McCartney and Black Sabbath. Its products are usually easily identifiable on stage by the glowing VU meters – which also feature on several Meters headphone models. The new entry-level NOVU-1 displays the 'VU meter logo' on each earcup and is a closed-back, wired design.

With custom-designed 50mm dynamic drivers designed to deliver an accurate response across the entire audio spectrum, the NOVU-1 was created for use at home, the studio and on the go.

The NOVU-1 features a gold-plated 3.5mm stereo mini-plug with 6.35mm threaded adapter included. The price also includes a carry bag, while the cables and ear pads are replaceable.

T for two

New interconnect for mid-priced turntables

PRICE: £239-£370 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** RUSSANDREWS.COM

Russ Andrews has unveiled the TT-2 phono interconnect cable for turntables equipped with phono socket outputs, combining the benefits of the Kimber braided cable design with those of an outer screen, to minimise hum pick up.

"The turntable cable is the one cable in a hi-fi system that must be screened to prevent pick up of hum, which is a potential problem with all cartridges, but more common with the moving-magnet designs often fitted to lower and mid-priced turntables," the company reveals.

The TT-2 follows Russ Andrews' TT-1 cable, which is a coax design and in part based around the wire used in the Kimber Select range. TT-2 is a more traditional braided Kimber design, made using three woven Teflon-insulated pure copper conductors per channel, around which a high-performance Kimber screen is fitted. The company explains the screen is connected: "in a very specific manner, which dramatically reduces noise pick up and prevents hum, while at the same time maintaining the audio fidelity that Kimber cables are renowned for". TT-2 is terminated with Kimber's UltraPlate RCA connectors.

"We've seen more and more turntable manufacturers moving away from hard-wired interconnects and fitting phono sockets to their products, specifically on lower-priced and midrange turntables," the company continues. "This is great, as it gives people the opportunity to use a higher performance cable to connect to the phono stage in their system, previously just the domain of high-end turntable users. And while TT-1 is perfect for entry-level turntables, the TT-2 provides a big performance increase for mid-level designs, opening up the music, allowing it to flow more freely, sounding cleaner, clearer, more musical and more relaxing".

The TT-2 is supplied with a spade terminated grounding wire of the same quality as the Kimber wire used in the main cable, for use with turntables that have a separate ground terminal.

Prices are: £239 for a 0.5m pair, £304 for a 1m pair and £370 for a 1.5m pair.

Aces wild

New range of wireless loudspeakers from Switzerland

PRICE: £100-£2,140 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** PIEGA.CH/EN/

A YEAR ON from the launch of its Ace passive loudspeaker range, Swiss company Piega has introduced a new range: Ace Wireless, a series of compact, fully integrated active loudspeakers with wireless sound for stereo and up to 7.1 channel setups.

The new Ace Wireless incorporates upgraded mid and bass MDS drivers, a revised version of Piega's Air Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter, digital amplification up to 200W per channel, streaming services and a sophisticated DSP system capable of handling up to 24-bit/192kHz music files. The system offers connectivity both wirelessly via WiSA or Bluetooth and wired via HDMI, optical or coaxial. It is DLNA certified and offers analogue connectivity for legacy audio products. Ace Wireless is Roon Ready and integrates Spotify Connect & HiFi and Google Chromecast. The built-in DSP system features switchable boundary gain compensation.

The series comprises the Ace 50 Wireless floorstanding speakers, Ace 30 Wireless bookshelf and the Ace Center Wireless for home cinema setups. All models are available in three colour finishes of sandblasted natural aluminium, anodised satin black or gloss white lacquer with colour coordinated, removable grilles. The Ace 50 and 30 Wireless models are available in TX (transmission) and RX (receiver) versions, a stereo pair being one of each unit.

The bookshelf Ace 30 Wireless is a compact two-way loudspeaker, featuring a 120mm MDS mid/bass driver and Air Motion Transformer ribbon tweeter. Powered by a 100W amplifier, it has a quoted frequency response of 35Hz-25kHz.

As different combinations of TX and RX models are required for different configurations, the speakers are available and priced individually as follows: Ace 30 Wireless – TX, £1,090 each (Aluminium)/£1,140 each (Black Anodised/White Gloss). RX, £900 each (Aluminium)/£950 each (Black Anodised/White Gloss).

The 105cm-tall Ace 50 Wireless floorstander is a three-way design featuring 4x 120mm MDS bass drivers, a single MDS midrange unit and an AMT ribbon tweeter. Powered by a 200W amplifier, it claims 30Hz-25kHz frequency response. Prices are as follows: Ace 50 Wireless – TX, £2,090 each (Aluminium)/£2,140 each (Black Anodised/White Gloss). RX, £1,900 each (Aluminium)/£1,950 each (Black Anodised/White Gloss).

Accessories are available for the range comprising stands for the Ace 30 at £160 each (Aluminium) and a ball-joint wall bracket for £100 each (Machined Aluminium).

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Non-essential signal carrying wires are eliminated, exemplified by the use of surface mount components when possible and by directly connecting the output stage to the speaker binding posts free of wires or solder to interfere with power delivery.

▶ For more details, go to Primare.net

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New DAC/headphone amp boasting the world's first lossless DSP

PRICE: £450 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** CHORDELECTRONICS.CO.UK

CHORD ELECTRONICS HAS launched Mojo 2, the replacement for its original Mojo portable DAC/headphone amplifier (*HFC* 423), which features the first lossless DSP in the world. This UHD DSP, Chord claims: "is fully transparent, enabling comprehensive tone adjustments across the frequency range,without any degradation in sound quality. The new technology gives Mojo 2 compatibility with today's wide-ranging choice of headphones, regardless of type and sonic signature, plus flexibility with different source components and digital file types.

"The UHD DSP enables fine-tuning across the full frequency range with 18 steps of adjustment per frequency banding: lower bass, mid-bass, lower treble and high treble. The volume control range has also been improved from +18dB to -108dB, and now benefits from two distinct operational ranges: low and high volume. A new four-setting crossfeed function – also DSP-controlled – brings speaker-like spatial effects for flexible headphone listening."

Another new feature is the introduction of a menu system. Navigated via a new (fourth) control sphere, the menu brings a mute function, four-setting crossfeed adjustment, a button-lock feature for travelling, plus the fully lossless tone controls. Digital inputs have increased to four, with a new USB-C data input featured alongside optical, coaxial (including dual-data for the M Scaler) and Micro USB. Two 3.5mm mini-jack headphone outputs allow for up to two people to listen simultaneously.

The Mojo 2 benefits from improved battery management too via a new FPGA-based charging system. Chord says: "the tech brings much faster charging rates, coupled with a huge 75 percent reduction in power loss for cooler, more efficient charging. Capacity is up by 9 percent resulting in better efficiency and improved battery life, which is now better than eight hours.

The Mojo 2's Intelligent Desktop Mode has also been improved, with an isolated battery and PSU redesign intended to support battery-free operation without any losses in sound quality, plus improved filtering and isolation.

The Mojo 2 is now DC-coupled with a digital DC servo and has a Watts Transient Aligned (WTA) filter, now offering 40,960 taps (the technical indicator of how complex the interpolation filter is), using 40 DSP cores. Additionally, a new noise-shaper offers greater depth and detail perception, plus Chord says improvements to the 4e Pulse Array DAC introduce lower distortion and out-of-band noise.

Handmade in the UK, the Mojo 2 boasts high-grade, bead-blasted aluminium casework, finished with a black anodise. Control is via Chord's familiar polychromatic polycarbonate control spheres. It's fully compatible with the Poly streamer/server, (*HFC* 431) enabling high-resolution streaming and up to 2TB of solid-state library storage and playback when using the microSD card slot.

Rediscover Music

Technics

WHERE FORM MEETS FUNCTION

The new SA-C600 Premium Class Network CD Receiver is a feature-packed music hub – with CD player, DAB radio and equipped for hi-res streaming from services including Spotify Connect, Tidal MQA and Amazon Music. A built-in phono stage means you can connect one of our iconic turntables – which inspired SA-C600's design. There's even a pair of optional speakers designed to deliver breathtaking sound.

SA-C600 Network CD Receiver is also available in black, shown with optional SB-C600 Speakers

To find your nearest Technics Premium Class dealer please scan :

Perfect fit

New, super-advanced earphones from Beats

PRICE: £200 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** APPLE.COM

BEATS HAS LAUNCHED what it's calling its most advanced earphones to date, the Beats Fit Pro. Featuring a custom-developed acoustic platform, 27-hour battery life with charging case, Active Noise Cancellation, Transparency, Adaptive EQ, spatial audio with dynamic head tracking and the Apple H1 chip, Beats says the Fit Pro: "represents a breakthrough in all-day fitness earphones," delivering three listening modes, auto play/pause, sweat-and water-resistant earbuds (IPX4)1 and coming in four colours: Black, White, Sage Gray and Stone Purple.

The company says Fit Pro's flexible wingtip design was digitally modelled: "using measurements from thousands of ears to achieve the perfect combination of soft, pliable material around a rigid core for a comfortable and stable fit on any ear shape or size."

The Beats also deploys an all-new custom transducer designed to deliver robust sound in a tiny form factor. It also boasts a vent system to minimise treble distortion across the flexible diaphragm. The company claims that the Beats Fit Pro's ANC continuously adapts in real time, up to 200 times per second, to account for variances in fit and movement. You can switch to Transparency mode with a push of the 'b' button on either earbud when you need to hear the world around you. When both ANC and Transparency are turned off, Adaptive EQ is enabled. Powered by Apple's computational audio, the inward-facing microphone in each earbud listens to the sound you are hearing and automatically tunes the low and mid-frequencies to the shape of your ear.

Spatial audio with dynamic head tracking provides an, "immersive, theatre-like experience" for content recorded in 5.1, 7.1, and Dolby Atmos.2 The gyroscopes and accelerometers in both Beats Fit Pro and your iPhone or iPad are used to track the motion of your head as well as your device and compare the motion data. The soundfield is then remapped so it stays anchored to the device, even as your head moves.

Another feature is that Beats Fit Pro uses skin-detect sensors to automatically play/pause content when earbuds are placed in or removed from your ears. The 'b' button allows you to control music (pause/skip/back), conduct calls and switch between listening modes. During phone calls, the earbuds leverage beam-forming microphones that target your voice as well as the internal mic and voice accelerometer, filtering out ambient noise and creating "a natural conversation experience" with the caller on the other end.

The company says the Apple H1 chip delivers a, "seamless ecosystem experience for iPhone users" including one-touch pairing and an eartip test to ensure best fit.

When ANC or Transparency are on, Beats Fit Pro promises up to six hours of listening time per earbud. The pocket-sized carrying case charges via USB-C and provides 21 additional hours of battery life, adding up to 27 hours of combined playback. In Adaptive EQ mode, each earbud has seven hours of listening time and 30 hours with the case. A five-minute Fast Fuel charge offers one hour of playback.

The Beats Fit Pro is also compatible with Android phones. By downloading the Beats Android app, you can setup your earbuds with one-touch pairing and a guided fit test. You can also toggle between listening modes in the app or customise the 'b' button on either earbud to enable voice assistant or volume control.

Finally, Beats Fit Pro's internal components are made from recycled plastic. The core packaging content comes from a zero-waste facility, the packaging is 88 percent wood fibre based – 74 percent of which is recycled material. Best of all, new subscribers can get Apple Music free for six months.

Connect fore!

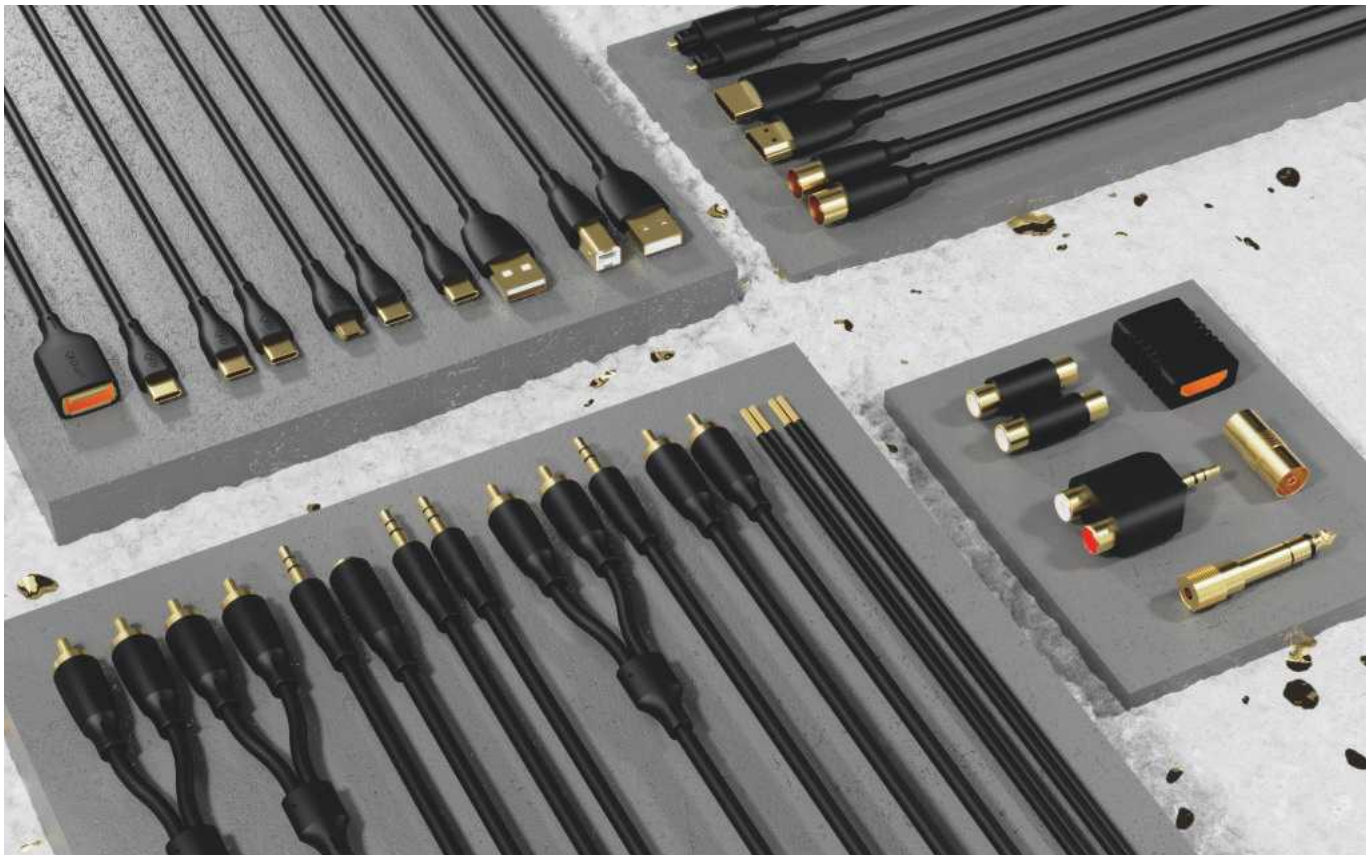
Extensive new UK cable range

PRICE: £8-£22 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** QED.CO.UK

BRITISH CABLE SPECIALIST

QED has launched a new range of custom-designed value AV cables and adapters. The Connect series has been designed in the UK and the entire range comes in a satin black finish, wrapped with a soft but durable, ultra-flexible PVC jacket for home or mobile use. Each cable (where applicable) features custom-moulded, 24K gold-plated QED connectors and plugs intended to provide noise-free, long-life connectivity and 99.99 percent oxygen-free copper conductors for reliable signal transfer. Each QED Connect cable comes in a variety of different lengths

Here's the range in full: Connect phono-to-phono: 0.75m £9.95, 1.5m £10.95, 3.0m £12.95. Connect 3.5mm jack-to-phono: 0.75m £10.95, 1.5m £11.95, 3m £12. Connect 3.5mm jack-to-jack: 1.5m £9.95, 3m £11.95. Connect 3.5mm headphone extension: 1.5m £9.95, 3m £11.95. Connect optical: 1.5m £9.95, 3m £10.95. Connect subwoofer: 3m £17.95, 6m £21.95. Connect speaker cable: 6m. Connect USB-A-to-USB-C: 0.75m £10.95, 1.5m £13.95. Connect USB-A-to-USB-B: 0.75m £8.95, 1.5m £12.95. Connect USB-A(F)-to-USB-C: 0.15m £8.95, 0.75m £12.95. Connect USB-C-to-USB-C: 0.15m £10.95, 0.75m £11.95. Connect USB-C-to-Micro-B: 0.15m £9.95, 0.75m £10.95. Connect phono-to-3.5mm jack adapter: £7.95. Connect 3.5mm-to-6.35mm jack adapter: £9.95. Connect phono (F-F) adapter: £7.95.



Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NAD C 700

ORIGIN
Canada/China

TYPE
Streaming amplifier

WEIGHT
4.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
218 x 96 x 266mm

FEATURES
- Quoted power output: 2x 80W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 2x RCA line-level
- Digital board with: optical; coaxial; HDMI ARC; BluOS streaming; AirPlay 2

DISTRIBUTOR
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

WEBSITE
nadelectronics.com

Think inside the box

The latest streaming amplifier from NAD borrows technology from further up the range. ***Ed Selley*** can't help coming to the conclusion that it's a bit of a winner

Audio terminology is a curious business. The 'just add speakers' style of all-in-one systems has become a dominant part of the market, but determining quite how dominant is made more complex by how manufacturers refer to their creations. The NAD C 700 is a perfect case in point. It could be a standard all-in-one, but as far NAD is concerned, it's a 'streaming amplifier'. Indeed it's the most affordable of the Canadian company's streaming amp family.

At its core, the C 700 is a combination of NAD's UcD Class D amplifier technology – which creates a switching amplifier from discrete analogue sections rather than a single chip amp – and the BluOS streaming front end that underpins many NAD and Bluesound components (as well as some of the C 700's competition (see How it compares). The amplifier section produces a claimed 80W into both 4ohm and 8ohm loads with peak output of 100W into the latter and 125W into the former. It delivers this into a single set of speaker terminals that are partnered with a subwoofer output that has its own internal crossover setting to better integrate a 2.1 system.

The BluOS installation is the same as we've seen elsewhere; combining an exceptional streaming service integration (realistically, anything you could reasonably ask for save Apple Music) with a stable and well laid out music library system. It also has full Roon certification. What elevates the C 700 above more terrestrial stablemates is the use of the full-colour display from the M10v2 and M33 (*HFC* 466). BluOS doesn't need such a thing to function, but it adds that final layer of slickness to the user experience. In the C 700 NAD has elected to use physical controls over a touchscreen. Having used both, I actually prefer this approach to the all-touchscreen one.

As well as the streaming module, the C 700 is fitted with a single coaxial and optical input, an HDMI ARC connection, two analogue line inputs, AirPlay 2 and two-way aptX

HD Bluetooth (that is to say it can send a signal to a pair of Bluetooth headphones as well as receive audio from a Bluetooth source). Sample rate compatibility is the same as other BluOS devices, with 24-bit/192kHz PCM supported, native MQA handled but not DSD (although BluOS can recognise DSD when compiling a library and convert it to PCM if you so require). This isn't as showy a specification as some options for similar money, but it does at least cover the vast majority of content that people are likely to have.

The most intriguing aspect of the specification is what you don't get as standard. The C 700 does not come with a remote handset and, while this might initially seem unforgivably parsimonious, having used it for a while I think that it's a fair decision. Used via the streaming module and HDMI ARC, volume will fall to hand

An accomplished one-stop solution that sounds excellent and is easy to use

via the app or TV remote rather than the NAD's own handset and, for the inputs outside this, it's capable of learning the codes from an existing handset. If you absolutely cannot envisage life without a dedicated remote, one is available as an option. A more niche omission is the Dirac calibration software that the more expensive NAD streaming amplifiers have, although in fairness this is not something anything else at the price is fitted with.

Aesthetically, the C 700 exists as a sort of halfway house between NAD's more traditional components and the M10 v2. As far as I'm concerned, this is a superb bit of industrial design because it manages to look and feel like a NAD (even without the help of the glowing logo built into the top panel), but offers a slickness to the way it looks and operates that feels absolutely bang up to date. Setup is logical and straightforward and the C 700 is largely stable (if not completely so – I have to reset it once after the sound output vanishes) in use. Build quality is excellent too, thanks to the metal casework and that crisp, clear display and the well-weighted controls.

HOW IT COMPARES

It's difficult to avoid comparing the C 700 and Roksan's Attessa streaming amplifier as they use the same BluOS platform. They are both excellent streamers, but reflect rather different design priorities with their amplification. The NAD is livelier and more immediate, but the Attessa is more forgiving. A more subjective difference is that the Attessa feels like an amplifier with excellent streaming on board; Roksan expects you to use more inputs. The NAD by contrast, feels self-contained but has added support for other devices. Simply choose the philosophy that suits you best.

Sound quality

The really good news for the C 700 is that it manages to partner those satisfying aesthetics with a sonic performance that feels equally well judged. For the most part I opt to pair it up with Fyne Audio's F500SP (see p60) and the relationship is a very happy one. NAD's development of its amplifier technology has been going on for some time now and it's reflected in the balance that the C 700 demonstrates during our time together on test. Unless you elect to partner it with some very forward speakers indeed, the NAD is exceptionally refined and controlled. If you push it very hard – louder than I suspect most domestic arrangements would allow – it hardens up a little, but does so only gradually.

This is balanced beautifully against the NAD's ability to sound lively and energetic. It takes the gloriously refined but fractionally restrained Fynes and coaxes a little extra joy out of them. The result is that the lovely *Blue Heaven* by Public Service Broadcasting threads a very clear path between sounding as propulsive and engaging as it needs to and not once tipping over into being edgy as the track reaches its peak. With something genuinely well recorded, like the fine 24-bit/88.2kHz Qobuz stream of Matthew Halsall's live performance of *Salute To The Sun*, the NAD reveals itself to be a genuinely ▶

CONNECTIONS

1. 2x RCA line-level inputs
2. Pre outputs
3. Subwoofer output
4. Coaxial input
5. Optical input
6. HDMI ARC output
7. Ethernet and USB A port for attaching external hard drive

TAKING CONTROL

You can use NAD's C 700 in 'dumb' mode if you prefer, but to do so would be to miss out on its main selling point: the BluOS streaming module and associated app. Not only in terms of operational ease of use (as we mention in the review, the C 700 doesn't ship with a physical remote control handset), but introducing the added benefits of network-based sources and multi-room potential.

There are iOS, Android and Kindle versions of the app available for smart devices, plus Mac and Windows desktop iterations should you require them, and all provide control over the key aspects of the hardware setup process (including establishing a Bluetooth headphone or speaker connection) and source selection/playback management. It's mostly intuitive, with album artwork and info given prominence during playback, but some housekeeping (hiding unused sources, adding 'favourites', etc.) can make it slicker still. One feature – a 'quality' filter of tracks and albums from your local library (options are CD, High Resolution and MQA) – is particularly useful, as the C 700's own display doesn't show sample/bitrate beyond a tiny coloured dot when an MQA file is detected.

compelling piece of hi-fi. Halsall's trumpet sounds vivid, tonally accurate and impressively detailed, and it anchors a wider performance that is no less enthralling.

This performance is admirably consistent across the selection of inputs that the NAD offers, but a slight element of caution needs to be expressed as to precisely how this happens. The C 700's volume adjustment is performed in the digital domain and it's beautifully linear. The caveat is that there's a degree of uniformity to the sound of items that are connected via the analogue inputs that might be more appropriate with an all-in-one system than it is a true streaming amplifier. Connecting a Roksan Attessa turntable to the C 700 via its internal phono stage results in a performance subtly but appreciably different to connecting it to the matching Attessa amplifier, even when you still use the turntable's internal phono stage. The saving grace is that the overall performance of the NAD remains extremely appealing even if it isn't as absolutely down-the-line as a more conventional analogue input board and volume control might potentially be.

The real payoff from this process is not performance, but how gloriously cohesive the NAD is to use and live with. I would imagine that the vast majority of playing time will be spent using the BluOS module and the integration of the C 700's functionality into this is exceptionally well realised and aided by the screen and jog dial-based control on the front panel for when something more specialist needs to be adjusted. I love that the display switches over to a pair of VU meters on the other inputs and that you can add the C 700 to a wider BluOS system and have another 63 zones of it, all controlled from the same app. In this day and age, performance on its own is not enough and with what it has produced here the design team at NAD clearly understands this.

The great aesthetics partner a sonic performance that is equally well judged

Conclusion

What all of this adds up to is a tremendously compelling proposition at the asking price. I would argue that the C 700 is more of an all-in-one system when compared with some actual streaming amplifiers at a similar price point, but this is as much a reflection of its superbly integrated functionality. NAD has built a truly accomplished one-stop solution that sounds consistently excellent and is exceptionally easy to use. This is a barnstorming product that deserves to be on anyone's shortlist at the price ●

The 5in hi-def colour display shows album art, track progress, and settings

HiFiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Lively yet refined sound; excellent spec; well-made; easy to use

DISLIKE: Slight character over analogue inputs; lack of remote

WE SAY: A brilliantly considered all-in-one streaming solution that's a joy to use and listen to

OVERALL ★★★★★

Old's cool.

The new Dynaudio Heritage Special.
Classic premium hi-fi, handmade with love in Denmark.

Listen to craftsmanship. Listen to real wood. Listen to true, state-of-the-art, hand-built tweeters and woofers. To more than 2000 hours of devoted R&D. To the depths of your record collection. Listen to what you love.

'Heritage Special' isn't just a name. It's a salute to traditional high-performance Danish audio design, featuring Dynaudio's now-legendary materials, technologies and performance.

Each of the 2500 limited-edition pairs is unique. And they're brimming with the spirit (and flødebolle-fuelled boldness) that made the Dynaudio name. Run your fingers over the hand-finished American Walnut veneer. Pause at the groove around the baffle (you'll remember it from our speakers that you coveted years ago). Then play some music and rock your socks off.

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www.dynaudio.com/heritage

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES GROUP TEST

ALL OF THE noise-cancelling headphones in this group can be used as conventional passive models along with the provided cables. This generally offers superior sound quality – as well as preserving battery – so we begin by testing each with any noise-cancellation modes deactivated. The source used throughout is an Astell&Kern A&norma SR25 (*HFC* 465), which supports both aptX and aptX HD Bluetooth and allows us to test any wireless capabilities.

The next step is to activate noise-cancelling modes on each headphone and compare performance under controlled conditions. Several models have adjustable levels of cancellation that allow a certain amount of background noise to be heard. However, our listening tests focus on each headphones' highest setting to block out as much of the background noise as possible.

To provide consistent levels of background noise we use sound files to simulate aircraft cabin noise (mynoise.net/NoiseMachines/cabinNoiseGenerator.php) and the more varied sounds of an airport departure lounge (soundsnap.com). These files are played at fixed volume via an Apple iPad Mini 6 connected to a KEF LSX (*HFC* 456) active speaker system. This ensures any background noise the headphones are subjected to is as consistent as the music tracks used during our listening tests (right).

TEST MUSIC

ELVIS COSTELLO & THE IMPOSTERS
Magnificent Hurt
The Boy Named If (Tidal Master)

HANS ZIMMER
Matera
No Time To Die – OST (Tidal Master)

JONI MITCHELL
California
Blue (Tidal Master)

THE CRUSADERS
Shake Dance
Healing The Wounds (Tidal 16/44.1 FLAC)

REFERENCE SYSTEM

PORTABLE DAC:
iFi Audio xDSD **£400** ***HFC* 439**

Most people are more likely to travel with a smartphone than a music player such as the A&K A&norma SR25, so if you want to beef up the sound from your smartphone this is a good travelling companion. As well as its variety of wired inputs, it also provides Bluetooth with aptX support.

LOSSLESS STREAMING:
Tidal HiFi **£20/month** ***HFC* 472**

Even Amazon has added an HD tier to its streaming music service now, so there's plenty of choice for CD-quality and hi-res music online. Tidal's HiFi streaming service is still one of our favourites, though, and offers over 50-million tracks in 16/44.1 FLAC as well as extensive hi-res Masters material.

DIGITAL AUDIO PLAYER:
Astell&Kern A&norma SR25 **£650** ***HFC* 465**

Smartphone audio quality continues to improve, but a Bluetooth/wi-fi equipped DAP such as this offers better than CD sound quality, streaming, wireless connectivity and, with memory card slots suitably filled, serious mass data storage. In short, it's a full-blown music server that fits in your hand.

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Network Integrated Amplifier

An investment in time well spent.

Introducing the MODEL 40n, engineered and crafted to bring the iconic Marantz sound to the next generation of music and entertainment. Master tuned to deliver rich, hi-resolution audio, it features built-in streaming, HDMI, and full complement of analog and digital inputs for luxurious listening from any source. Simply add speakers and indulge yourself in the moments.

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Grouptest

NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES £120-£350

Cancel culture

Wireless, noise-cancelling headphones have never been smarter or sounded better, but truly nailing the sonic sweet spot is this month's challenge set by ***David Vivian***

FOUR OF THE six contenders in this roundup of wireless, noise-cancelling, over-ear headphones cost £350, and that says something. In matters of headline tech, standout performance and ear-pampering practicalities offered at a comfortably affordable price, this is where the fiercest competition lives – always good news as it drives innovation and value for money.

And, make no mistake, what's on offer here is remarkable. There are 'cans for courses': IEMs for music on the move or in the gym, high-end wired designs for the ultimate 'head-fi' experience at home. But the premium, noise-cancelling, wireless over-ear variety is truly the any place, any time, all-seasons specialist of the species tasked with delivering sweet sonics, significant attenuation of ambient noise, long-term wearability and a high standard of user convenience – perhaps most usefully the ability to swiftly pull out of ANC to answer the phone supplying the tunes or order another gin and tonic on a long-haul flight before easing back into a music-infused world of your own.

If we accept the direction of convergence tech travel is signposted by the rise of, say, the smartwatch, it isn't unreasonable of today's on-trend music lovers to expect an all-singing hi-fi system to come in a zip-up pouch and that's essentially the proposition we have here – for some, the only stereo kit they'll ever need. If it looks stylish, then so much the better – although Final's UX3000 is unapologetically plain and plasticky, albeit at less than half the price of many of the premium suspects here. Can it cut the sonic mustard? To find out, you'll have to read on.

ON TEST

Bowers & Wilkins PX7 £350 p32
Not the newest kit on the block, B&W's wireless flagship still has the tech, style and build quality to impress. But is the sound just as classy?

Cleer Audio Alpha £350 p35
When it comes to features, the Alpha is the class of the field, boasting three noise-cancelling options, five-band EQ and a Dirac Virtuo spatial function.

DALI IO-6 £350 p36
What it lacks in bells and whistles, Denmark's finest more than makes up for in material desirability and purity of purpose – simply to sound great.

Final UX3000 £120 p38
Final's reputation for delivering fine sound at a very reasonable price is powerfully expressed in its latest budget offering. A born overachiever?

Philips Fidelio L3 £300 p40
Philips sets out to make the consummate all-rounder with the L3. To look at it's rather unassuming, but its broad skillset certainly isn't to be underestimated.

Sennheiser Momentum 3 Wireless £350 p42
HFC's reigning *Group Test* champ is back to defend its crown. Battery life isn't the best, but the stylish Momentum remains a formidable package.

SENNHEISER

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins PX7

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Closed-back, wireless, noise-cancelling headphone

WEIGHT
310g

FEATURES
- 43.6mm drivers
- Quoted battery life: up to 30 hours
- Dedicated app

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Bowers & Wilkins PX7 £350

Hard to imagine a classy wireless get-together without B&W, and the PX7 is as classy as it gets

It might not bring the shock of the new to the group, but as B&W's flagship wireless ANC model, the PX7 knocks on the door of shockingly good in most key areas and is something of a looker to boot. Early doors implementation of Qualcomm's 24-bit/48kHz-compatible aptX HD Bluetooth codec grabbed headlines back in 2020, but it's the PX7's thorough-going quality that has kept it competitive. So, a high bar to negotiate for the rest.

B&W's headphones have always shared a distinctive design and choice of materials and the PX7 is no different with a hard-wearing fabric finish on the oval earcups and dog leg-shaped headband arms – now made from a custom carbon fibre composite that is lighter than the metal previously used. That said, at 310g, the PX7 is far from the lightest in the group but, with a plumply-padded headband and nicely judged earpad pressure, it is among the most comfortable.

Noise cancelling is activated by pressing the only button on the shell of the left earcup. It's also configurable via an app. To digitally process out much of the outside sound, the headphone is fitted with four microphones – plus two for telephony. By group standards, High is the only setting that provides worthwhile isolation in noisy environments, but it is as effective as any other here. Pressing the button for two seconds initiates ambient mode so you can have a chat without removing the headset. The large proprietary 43.6mm drivers give a quoted frequency response of 10Hz to 30kHz and there's a 3.5mm stereo jack for wired connections and USB-C socket for a second wired input and charging. A claimed battery life of 30 hours puts the PX7 comfortably in the energy-sipping ballpark, but in the fold-to-store stakes the news isn't so rosy: the earcups twist flat to fit into their oval carry case but that's it. Quite bulky.

Sound quality

Magnificent Hurt from Elvis Costello's latest album, *The Boy Named If*, is a lock-tight fit for the buoyant and muscular-sounding PX7 and a glorious start to the listening session. A pulsating, garage rock rumble paced along *Pump It Up* lines, it sounds wonderfully raw, brutal and full blooded. Bass has guts and grumble, Steve Nieve's wicked organ breaks slicing through the thickly layered mix. Costello is in fine, full, throaty voice, which is so well-lit, even the tiniest inflection is laid bare. The song motors along with bags of drive and energy and is right up the B&W's street. Strictly neutral? No. Huge fun? Without a doubt.

Hans Zimmer, master of the moody, soaring string arrangement and cinematic, viscera-rippling, infrabass 'pluff' combines both in *Matera* from the *No Time To Die* soundtrack and similarly finds a friend in the PX7. The B&W plays the opening low bass 'pluff' with plenty of weight and an easily heard pulsing while the dynamic swell and ebb of massed cellos and violins are painted in rich, warm hues and given plenty of expressive headroom as the affecting *We Have All The Time In The World* refrain (from *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*) kicks in.

How about the pristine pipes of a young Joni Mitchell in an equally pristine recording of *California* from *Blue*? Intimate, superb midband transparency and the beautifully rendered timbre of James Taylor's acoustic guitar. It's a track that can easily sound too stark and squeaky clean, but the B&W ekes out some flesh and colour. It's good at that ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Style; comfort; punchy, muscular sound; battery life

DISLIKE: Doesn't fold down for storage

WE SAY: Good looks, great sound – what's not to like?

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Sit back, relax,
enjoy the music
Discover more at rotel.com/60years
60
ROTEL
EXCEPTIONAL AUDIO SINCE 1961

nucleus

by

roon

SIMPLY THE BEST WAY TO EXPERIENCE ROON

High-quality powerful fan-less optimised streaming server, powered by roon OS.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED — July 2018*

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT — April 2018*

*Reviews of the original Nucleus+, which has the same technical performance of the 2019 revision but with a different look.

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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cleer Audio Alpha

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Closed-back, wireless, noise-cancelling headphone

WEIGHT
330g

FEATURES
- 40mm drivers
- Quoted battery life: up to 35 hours
- Cleer+ app

DISTRIBUTOR
KS Distribution

Cleer Audio **Alpha £350**

Bored with the usual suspects and want to explore new options, like Dirac and five-band EQ? The Alpha awaits

Cleer Audio. An apt 'does what it says' name for a headphone brand. A little bulkier than most in the group, the Alpha weighs 330g, is softly padded in all the right places and comfortable to wear for hours at a time. True, vogueish design won't be on top of the list of any potential buyer, but it is well made with an up-market blend of robust-feeling plastics and soft materials.

Wireless connectivity comes courtesy of Bluetooth 5.1 (far less power hungry than earlier versions), with support for SBC, AAC and aptX Adaptive codecs. The Alpha's 40mm full-range drivers use what Cleer calls a multiple-magnet 'ironless' motor system to banish audible distortion.

As well as a smattering of physical controls on the rims of the earcups, there's a capacitive touch-surface on the outside of the right ear-cup covering play/pause/skip, volume, answer/end/reject call and 'conversation mode' functions. Additionally, the 'Cleer+' control app (for iOS and Android) duplicates the physical controls and allows access to the five-band equaliser. The right ear-cup also hosts the power/pairing button and there's a 3.5mm socket for wired connection. On the other earcup there's the charging USB-C port and a button that, depending on the press/double press/hold protocols, cycles through the noise cancelling options (including the progressive 'ambient noise control') and switches Dirac Virtuo spatial audio on and off. The slick app makes life easier and lets you play with the EQ, though only if Dirac is off.

Battery life is an outstanding 35 hours, and that's with ANC on. Charging speed is equally impressive, the Alpha taking just two hours to go from flat to full. If you can't wait that long, 10 minutes plugged into the mains gives four hours of playback.

Sound quality

There's more than a whiff of 'uber-hi' to the Alpha's presentation, which immediately draws attention to detail. That the midband appears to be mildly pushed certainly contributes to the impression. Elvis Costello's vocal is given more prominence than with the B&W, but sounds subtly thinner. The whole tonal profile seems leaner and cooler. Retrieval of low-level detail is excellent, but dynamics and honest-to-goodness grunt feel strangely muted.

This reticence carries over to *Matera*. It doesn't really matter how much of a bass boost I give the five-band equaliser, the cinematic low bass 'pluff' lacks definition and texture. It's far from the warmest or smoothest treatment of the tidal surge of massed strings, either. Imagining you're in the local picture house, eyes closed, isn't going to work.

The Crusaders' *Shake Dance* is a curious recording, embedded with scintillating, rhythm-driven musicianship yet somewhat hamstrung by a bleached, almost skeletal presentation – hard to get into unless the replay system can dig as well as it does detail. Apart from emphasising rhythm, the Alpha's mid-forward balance isn't an asset here. Joe Sample's deliciously deft and tasteful piano solo sounds somewhat hard and clunky, peppered with a few mildly distorting 'hot' notes against a curtain of synth pads that sound thicker and less 'luminous' than they really should. The Alpha doesn't do anything heinous, but neither does it draw you in quite as much as you'd hope. It can paint a spacious soundstage, especially with the Dirac Virtuo mode engaged, but occasional midband hardness detracts – especially with piano ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½

FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Well-made; fully featured; wide soundstage; excellent ANC implementation

DISLIKE: Forward midrange can sound a little hard

WE SAY: Thoroughly conceived, but a rather uneven performer

OVERALL ★★★★½

DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI IO-6

ORIGIN
Denmark/China

TYPE
Closed-back, wireless, noise-cancelling headphone

WEIGHT
325g

FEATURES
- 50mm drivers
- Quoted battery life: up to 30 hours

DISTRIBUTOR
DALI UK

DALI IO-6 £350

DALI makes lovely speakers. If its first foray into cans is as gorgeous as it looks, we should be in for a treat

As you might expect, DALI didn't decide to wing it in one of the toughest market sectors of all. In fact, the Danish company has used cues from its speaker designing past rather than taking its lead from masters of the headphone art. As such, its oversized 50mm drivers are custom made and use paper/fibre cones. And, just like its speaker enclosures, the IO-6's earcups are braced and damped to cut down resonance. The compromises inherent with Bluetooth are a given, but DALI's focus on sound quality is as sharp as ever. No surprise, then that aptX HD Bluetooth is supported and, as with all the contenders, the effect of the active noise cancellation is boosted by an impressive degree of passive isolation.

Whizz-bang features such as the Cleer Audio Alpha's five-band EQ and Dirac spatial enhancement don't get house room, leaving the IO-6 a delightfully straightforward, performance-led proposition. It's an especially comfortable design with large, articulated circular earcups that achieve a really snug fit without the necessity for excessive side pressure. They fold flat for storage, too.

Power up and Bluetooth pairing is automatic. As there isn't an app – features are pretty basic so it would be something of an extravagance – all you have to contend with is a small round button on the rim of the right earcup that switches between some basic noise-cancelling options, though to be fair, these are very effective, capable of reducing the sounds of the city to a gentle murmur. The Transparency setting pauses playback and routes ambient noise into the headphones so you can hear announcements or someone talking to you. Touch sensitive control is granted in the metallic inners of the earcups, the upper and lower edges taking care of volume while pressing the middle, where the DALI logo is, gives track control, call handling or access to your device's voice assistant. A claimed battery life of 30 hours with ANC on is par for the group.

Sound quality

This isn't the beefiest or ballsiest Elvis has sounded. On the other hand, the DALI shines an insightful light on *Magnificent Hurt* that's precise with great separation, a roomy soundstage and pristine leading-edge detail. There can be no doubt it drills down into the recording, which can bring its own rewards. That said, it does so sounding a little lightweight. Also, there's a slight treble emphasis that can exacerbate any sibilant tendencies in a recording.

Zimmer fairs little better. The cinematic low bass 'pluff' is present, but rather anaemic while the violins carrying the *We Have All The Time…* theme certainly stand out against the lower register wash of cellos, but don't sound particularly sweet. And, of all the headphones in the group, the DALI is the only one that applies a very slight edge to Joni's achingly pure vocal on *California*. Even so, the upshot is enjoyable – crisp and clean with almost palpable guitar presence and exquisite micro-detail.

The lean balance and relentless transparency are a little too much for The Crusaders, though, where the DALI's dry and analytical take is more fascinating than fun. In a performance that could hardly be further removed from that of the warm and rich Philips Fidelio L3, the DALI's treatment of *Shake Dance* showcases an outstandingly expansive soundstage, tightly focused imaging and Windolene-level transparency with spot-on timing, but with this track in particular, a distracting amount of pushed treble detail ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Gorgeous design and build; good ANC; supremely transparent sound

DISLIKE: Lean balance; limited dynamic expression

WE SAY: Materially very desirable, but sound can lack impact

into the groove

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www.hegel.com

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Final UX3000

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Closed-back, wireless, noise-cancelling headphone

WEIGHT
260g

FEATURES
● Quoted battery life: up to 35 hours

DISTRIBUTOR
KS Distribution

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Final UX3000 £120

Short on bling, maybe, but premium sonics at a penny-pinching price is Final's aim here

Riffing on the theme that you can't have your cake and eat it, Final asks customers just one question: do you want to pay for headphones that have a large dollop of fashion cred to go with satisfying sonics or shell out not much at all for plainer, simpler fare that's just as comfortable and still sounds great? That's what the UX3000 is all about.

Have corners been cut? Of course, but as with all the best budget hi-fi, it's how well you cover your tracks that's key, and there's an honesty in Final's approach I find laudable. Attempts to disguise or prettify the plastic build are non-existent. It's hard plastic, too, but usefully wears a textured coating called Shibo which is resistant to dirt and fingerprints. It provides a link of sorts with Final's flagship D8000 model which has the same coating. The faux-leather-padded oval ear cups aren't as generously proportioned as some, either, yet still manage to provide a snug, comfortable fit – for my ears, at least – and being the lightest headset of the group, long-term wearability vies for top honours.

Noise-cancelling performance is excellent – the equal of any on test – yet simply implemented by two microphones with sensors on the inside and outside of each earcup. The analysis of the sound samples collected from both microphones is used to generate an accurate anti-noise signal. Bluetooth 5.0 supports aptX and aptX LL (Low Latency – zero lag) codecs, pairing is fast and secure. The UX3000 also features multi-point connection, which means you can connect two Bluetooth devices at the same time, one to listen to music on, the other to take incoming calls.

Battery life is good rather than exceptional, Final claiming 25 hours with ANC on and a further 10 hours with it switched off. The UX3000 isn't bulky to begin with, but the earcups fold up into the headband which just allows it to squeeze into the drawstring cloth carrying bag.

Sound quality

Question is, does half the asking price equal an audible downgrade? Seems not. After the DALI, Elvis And The Imposters are back sounding properly tough, taut and propulsive. Costello's wrung-out vocal isn't pushed in the mix for effect, but naturally grounded, well-balanced and cohesive. Tonality is on the dark side, which steals some treble air but doesn't undermine the wide, deep soundstage or the solid imaging therein. The track's growling bass is joyfully punchy and tuneful with good texture and shape.

No, the UX3000 doesn't sound quite as ebullient and colourful as the B&W and Sennheiser, but it does plough an unwavering musical path with considerable skill that values grace and understatement perhaps more than unrestrained exuberance. It shows with *Matera* from *No Time To Die*. The Zimmer low bass 'pluff' isn't the deepest or weightiest, but it doesn't fall far short and is very well defined, the distinctive pulsing structure easy to discern. There are smooth massed strings, too, with proper depth and warmth without sounding over romanticised.

California is nicely judged as well, avoiding the trap of sounding astringent and sterile, Joni's stellar vocal locked dead centre, pure and soulful. The Final also exhibits the knack of fleshing out *Shake Dance,* but not to the point of sapping its energy or softening its snap and rhythmic momentum. The soundstage is pretty special, too, allowing plenty of elbow room and space to breathe for the musicians ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★☆
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Simple, honest design; enjoyable sound quality; excellent ANC

DISLIKE: Doesn't look as good as the others

WE SAY: A value-for-money masterclass

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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Philips Fidelio L3

ORIGIN
Netherlands

TYPE
Closed-back, wireless, noise-cancelling headphone

WEIGHT
360g

FEATURES
- 40mm drivers
- Quoted battery life: up to 38 hours
- Philips app

DISTRIBUTOR
Philips Europe

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

Philips Fidelio L3 £300

Philips' Fidelio line is the 'safe pair of hands' of the headphone world, but the aim is a little higher

Philips refers to the L3 as 'accessible high-end', an approach that extends to the choice of materials and build quality as well as sound that's rich and refined, tuned as much by ear as measurement by the Fidelio team. Assets include a group-best battery life of 38 hours, which falls to a still generous 32 hours if you keep the ANC switched on while 15 minutes plugged in gets you a handy six hours of playback. Forget to power down when you take them off and the L3s will do it for you after a few minutes.

Wireless connectivity runs to Bluetooth 5.1 and aptX HD and pairing teamed with a long button hold power up. Key play and phone functions can then be controlled with touch gestures to the outer surfaces of the left and right earcups. Google Assistant and Alexa are built in so pulling up your favourite playlist shouldn't be a chore.

The noise-cancellation system uses no fewer than four microphones to minimise outside noise, plus a fifth assigned to banish background sounds when making voice calls. There's a dedicated app that lets you adjust the level of noise cancellation by switching between pre-set ANC modes. Also present is a dedicated equaliser with six bands, one better than the Cleer Alpha.

Apparently, considerable effort went into making passive isolation a foundation of the design, the Fidelio team reasoning that it's better to have less noise as a starting point which, in turn, needs less active cancelling. As such, the L3's earcups have strengthening ribs to add rigidity and minimise vibration. Different memory foams were tested for comfort and isolation properties. Originally the plan had been to employ the same sustainable Muirhead leather that's used on the headband to cover the earpads, but this was switched to protein leather during development crucially because it was found to give better sonic results with the bespoke 40mm drivers sitting a little further back in the earcups.

Sound quality

Of all the sonic signatures on test, the Fidelio L3's is the easiest to sum up with one word. Chilled. You might be inclined to think this does the flat-chat Elvis Costello cut few favours, but it really isn't an issue. The music just flows in an easy going, unforced way. Attention isn't pulled in any particular direction. Rather, it's a seriously well-executed balancing act – wholesome, well-upholstered and, yes, even decently dynamic. Top drawer easy listening minus all of the bland connotations.

The L3 is also unflappable. Nothing fazes it. Zimmer's orchestration sounds fabulous with effortlessly deep, rumbling, pulsing bass and silky strings all beautifully rendered. The slight edge the DALI introduces to Joni's vocal is completely absent here, soothed by an overarching smoothness and sense of couth that pulls the sting from thin, hard, brittle recordings. It's clear that portraying the musical performance takes precedent over spotlighting the usual individual hi-fi tropes.

It's just the tonic needed to put some weight on the bones and rescue the recording of The Crusaders' *Shake Dance* from terminal weediness. The L3 plushes out the bass without sapping sass from Wilton Felder's saxophone and does full justice to the Sample piano solo, which hangs rich and harmonically replete in front of a lush synth backdrop. Whatever I play, the results remain the same as the Fidelio L3 sounds natural, forgiving and unfatiguing ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Warm and inviting sound quality; build; comfort; exceptional battery life

DISLIKE: Nothing of any real note

WE SAY: The most polished and rounded headphone of the entire group

OVERALL ★★★★★

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twenty5.26*i* - Nov 20

twenty5.26*i* - Dec 20

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sennheiser Momentum 3 Wireless

ORIGIN
Germany/China

TYPE
Closed-back, wireless, noise-cancelling headphone

WEIGHT
305g

FEATURES
- 42mm drivers
- Quoted battery life: up to 17 hours
- Dedicated app

DISTRIBUTOR
Sennheiser UK

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Sennheiser
Momentum 3 Wireless £350

If there's a headphone to beat in this roundup of high achievers, this is almost certainly the one

Its look is unmistakable and unique, the reputation for fine sonics, built over two previous generations, undeniable. Yet the strength of the competition has never been more challenging for Sennheiser's previous *Group Test* winner. Second time round, this is its moment of truth.

Third generation maybe, but aesthetic tweaks are largely invisible. Even more comfortable than before, the slightly larger oval-shaped earcups still sport sheepskin leather earpads and the neat stainless-steel adjustment sliders remain. Merely unfolding the Momentums from their stowed state automatically initiates power up and pairs them with a recognised Bluetooth source. They also pause transmission when unclamped and resume when donned once more – a handy trick they share with the Fidelio L3.

Built around a pair of 42mm drivers, the Momentum 3 Wireless has Bluetooth 5.0 with aptX, aptX LL, SBC and AAC codec support. Wired connection is via 3.5mm jack socket or USB-C (which doubles as a charging port) – likewise a mode to let the outside in when needed and a microphone for making calls or using your phone's voice assistant. The earcup rim buttons are plentiful, but a little fiddly to use so the control app is a welcome option and gives access to the EQ function – which can make subtle tonal adjustments if desired.

The app also lets you view information such as battery life and switches between three noise-cancelling modes: 'Max', 'Anti-Wind' (allowing some ambient noise in) and 'Anti-Pressure' which delivers the mildest attenuation.

One feature that really puts the Momentum 3 a step ahead is an integrated Bluetooth tracker and support for the third-party Tile app, which can pinpoint the whereabouts of a misplaced Momentum. Peace of mind, but yet another feature on a long list which inevitably takes a toll on the 17 hour battery life.

Sound quality

For any other headphone in the group, the Fidelio L3 would be a tough act to follow. Not for nothing, however, did the Sennheiser win our last wireless headphone roundup. From a sound quality perspective alone it advances an equally compelling case. In many respects it's the Philips on Red Bull.

Like the Fidelio it's a best-of-all-worlds kind of presentation that scarcely puts a foot wrong, irrespective of musical genre – nothing seems to trip it up. The difference is, it tries harder to please and doesn't spare the horses in the endeavour. Revisiting *Magnificent Hurt*, Elvis simply sounds more energised, the Imposters more pumped. A hugely rewarding convergence of abilities emerges where drive and drama meets delicacy and finesse. Treble quality in particular is superb, brimming with detail yet refined and never overstated.

Playing The Crusaders, the Momentum serves up sublime even handedness and balance like the L3, but with greater insight and subtlety, more tonal colour and dynamic freedom. Sample's solo is sharper and more percussive with stunningly clean and crisp leading edges, the whole piece underpinned by rock-solid rhythmic precision.

The Sennheiser passes the Zimmer low bass 'pluff' test with flying colours, too, while Joni sounds more flesh and blood and the strings on James Taylor's guitar have more metallic bite and harmonic shimmer. It's an addictive listen and object lesson in how to do it properly ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Stunning sound quality; style; comfort; selection of features

DISLIKE: Disappointing battery life

WE SAY: If style and sound quality are priorities, look no further

OVERALL ★★★★★

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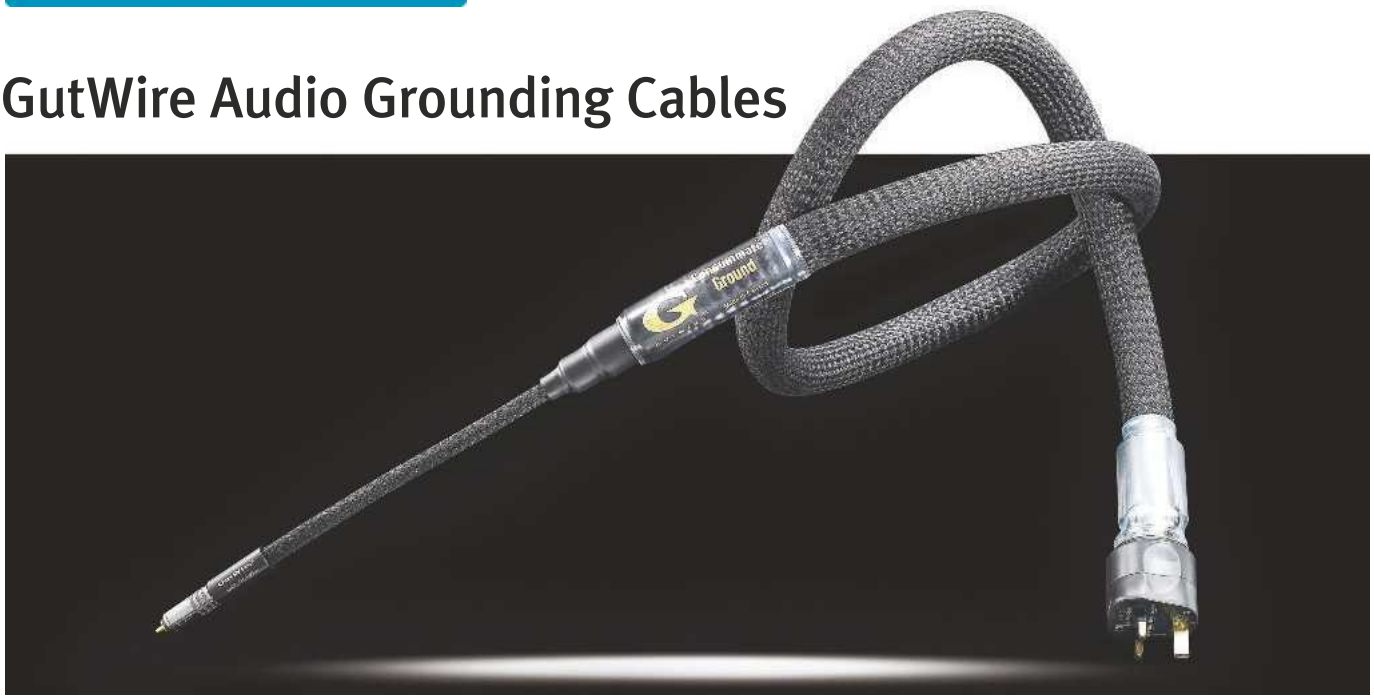

Clockwise from top: Consummate Ground Cable; Ultimate Ground Cable; Perfect Ground Cable.

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Group test verdict

Beguiled by the sound of silence, ***David Vivian*** emerges from a music world of his own to reveal which of these noise-cancellers hits the sonic sweet spot

THE MESSAGE TO take away from this test is that these days you sacrifice little in ultimate sound quality if you want to enjoy the benefits of noise cancelling. Only a few of the models sound better in passive wired guise, and then not by much.

A talented bunch for sure, but as ever there must be a countdown and, a little to my surprise, it's the Cleer Alpha that kicks us off. Not short of ambition or appealing features, it only stumbles with its occasionally too mid-prominent sound. Just a few tweaks away from all-round excellence. Much the same applies to the DALI IO-6. Full marks for style, comfort, ANC performance and build quality but, despite its transparent and detailed presentation, it really could do with more colour in its cheeks. Fourth goes to Final's UX3000 which, for the money, is an outstanding bargain. Plain and plasticky it might be, but if you value musical goodness more than a trendy aesthetic, it does the business in fine fashion.

On to the top three. First on the podium is the B&W PX7, which shouts 'premium' from every pore, amply covers all tech bases and is a hugely entertaining listen in the best B&W tradition. More 'visceral' than the others, it's dynamic and detailed with bags of pep in its step. But it doesn't quite have the sonic scope of the Sennheiser, which does dynamic and deft with unmatched skill and is simply the most exciting sounding headphone in the group. Its winning style, build and comfort are mighty enticing, too. That said, its earcup buttons are fiddly, it lacks the convenience of touch-sensitive surface control and its 17-hour battery is way off the pace for the group. The Momentum remains very desirable even so.

WINNER

Philips' Fidelio L3 is calmer and warmer but no less rewarding than the Sennheiser, and a peerless all-rounder with no discernible shortcomings. It might have rather unassuming looks, but its strength is in depth with skills in all departments. A worthy winner!

Make/model	**Bowers & Wilkins** PX7	**Cleer Audio** Alpha	**DALI** IO-6	**Final** UX3000	**Philips** Fidelio L3	**Sennheiser** Momentum 3 Wireless
Price	£350	£350	£350	£120	£300	£350
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Has a lot going for it and oozes quality, but its full-blooded, sound is best of all	Wireless ANC tech is great, but the sound quality doesn't quite measure up	DALI's speaker knowhow helps with terrific clarity, but it needs more colour	A stripped-back, no-nonsense approach that offers great sound	A self-effacing design that speaks quietly, but carries a very big stick	The most exciting sounding headphone here falls just short
Website	bowers-wilkins.co.uk	cleeraudio.com	dali-uk.co.uk	snext-final.com/en/	philips.co.uk	En-uk.sennheiser.com

Key features

Design	Over-ear	Over-ear	Over-ear	Over-ear	Over-ear	Over-ear
Bluetooth	Yes aptX	Yes aptX	Yes aptX	Yes aptX	Yes aptX	Yes aptX
Passive mode	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Battery life	30 hours	35 hours	30 hours	35 hours	38 hours	17 hours
Touch sensitive	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

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STREAMING SERVICE:
Qobuz **£15 per month** ***HFC* 472**

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HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER/DAC:
iFi Audio xCan **£300** ***HFC* 447**

An affordable headphone amp that can really boost performance from smartphones when you're travelling. It has a Bluetooth wireless mode that supports aptX and AAC codecs, and claims to give up to 12 hours battery life.

PLAYBACK SOFTWARE:
Roon **£120 per year** ***HFC* 448**

Still the best means of combining a library of owned files with your favourite streaming service content. Roon has a superb interface, high-quality curation and the ability to tie many different companies' products into a single system.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AVID HiFi Reference Four

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
25kg (40kg with stands)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) 210 x 367 x 440mm

FEATURES
- 28mm Acuflex-coated silk dome
- 160mm damped polymer composite mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (6.5ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
AVID HiFi Ltd.

WEBSITE
avidhifi.co.uk

Heavy metal machine

AVID's 'sledgehammer-to-crack-a-nut' two-way features a massive all-alloy cabinet with tuned mass dampers to kill unwanted resonances – and this is the smallest in its range!

Unloading the three AVID HiFi boxes that these standmounts arrive in – one for each Reference Four speaker, at £20,000 a pair, plus one for the included (and very hefty) stands – you'd be forgiven for jumping to the obvious conclusion that what you're dealing with here is intended for playing heavy metal. And as fate would have it, you wouldn't be that far off the truth for, while most speakers do very nicely enough thank you very much with variations on the wooden box theme, the Reference Fours opt for all-alloy cabinets, with panels up to 15mm-thick, sitting on six 'risers' attached to a thick alloy baseplate. Hence why each of these relatively compact speakers, at just under 370mm tall, weighs a decidedly hefty 25kg.

Furthermore, the cabinets may only be 210mm wide, which is almost as narrow as they could be while still accommodating the 160mm-wide mid/bass drivers, but they're also 440mm deep, meaning they'll overhang most aftermarket stands. AVID has this predicament covered with its own supports, although fitting them to the speakers is really something of a palaver. After assembling the stands, you must remove the baseplate from the speakers, bolt that to the stand, and then fix the baseplate back to the

six riser feet again. Not your usual 'take them out the box and stick them on a shelf' setup, then, but the effort is absolutely worth your while.

This entire assembly stands just under a metre tall and totals 40kg per side, but with the centre of gravity up high, it doesn't feel quite as topple-proof as perhaps it really should. While it would seem positively perverse to suggest the stands should be even heavier still, perhaps they could have done with an even weightier footplate?

With their equally sizeable price tag, it may come as a surprise to learn that the Fours are actually the entry-level offering in AVID's Reference range. This British company is best-known for its vinyl replay products, which allows the brand to offer a complete system from LP to amplification to speakers. Above the Reference Four sits the larger £55k Reference Three standmount (and stands) before we move on to the £135k Reference Two floorstanders and the £22k Reference Active Sub. The Reference One flagship, standing almost 2m tall and weighing 340kg apiece, costs £200k. Now that is heavy metal!

Wot no bracing?

As with all the range, the Reference Four's enclosure is machined and constructed in-house at the company's Cambridgeshire base, using aerospace-grade aluminium plates and with all fixings concealed. Resonance control is a feature of the alloy construction, and so AVID sensibly side steps the stuffing and bracing we might see in a conventional wooden cabinet.

The thick aluminium alloy assembly offers an innate rigidity while the drivers are fixed in place with O-ring seals and compression plates, designed to spread the clamping force around the entire circumference of the driver's basket. Not for AVID a handful of bolts… Furthermore, tuned mass dampers are mounted via decoupling assemblies to the rear of the drivers, soaking up any unwanted vibration before it leaves the unit itself, thus removing the need for further cabinet treatment.

That thinking also informs the design of the bass-tuning port that vents downward into the space created by those riser feet and onto a cone-shaped diffuser mounted on the baseplate. This distributes the port output over a full 360°, AVID claiming a superior 30Hz bass extension and reduced sensitivity to room placement versus a more conventional rear-mounted port.

The drivers are sourced from Morel, the 28mm silk-dome tweeter shared across the Reference range and featuring a dome treated with Acuflex. As the name suggests, this is claimed to promote accurate flexing, where break-up modes are counteracted by others working in the opposite direction. The tweeter is powered by a neodymium magnet and 28.6mm Hexatech (honeycomb) aluminium voice coil on a titanium former. Furthermore, the coil winding height is shorter than the magnetic gap so it remains within the magnetic field at all times, improving transient response. The driver is mounted behind a short flare on the alloy baffle to improve its off-axis behaviour.

The partnering 160mm mid/bass driver uses a damped polymer composite cone mounted in a 'Uniflow' basket, this is designed using aerodynamic principles to smooth the airflow behind. Meanwhile the crossover uses ClarityCap capacitors, as in all the Reference speakers, along with 'Copper Connect' technology for reduced signal path resistance. Similarly, the air-core inductors are wound with 1.25mm-thick enamelled copper wire, its low DC resistance promising better bass control.

They grab the listener and demand attention regardless of musical genre

AVID's notes for positioning the speakers are fairly general. It suggests starting with them closer together than they are from the listening position – 45cm from the rear wall – noting that placing them too close boosts bass, but may impact on clarity and stereo image. It also advises they are well in from side walls, then "adjust until you are happy with the sound". Slight toe-in is recommended – "pointing slightly toward, but not directly at, the listening position" – as this will give the best trade-off between stereo imaging and enough spread for several listeners. It's good to see a manufacturer proposing hi-fi as a social experience!

Sound quality

With a little jiggling and experimenting, these suggestions seem to work well, and after some time spent with different amplification, a 'vintage' Naim setup of NAC52/52PS/NAP250 is settled on, connected to the Reference Four's substantial single-wire terminals using runs of Naim NAC A5 cable. While the speakers need the preamp to be turned up a bit to achieve decent SPLs, this is no problem – as with all Naim amps, this combination really seems to get into its stride at higher levels and drives the speakers with plenty in reserve to accommodate musical dynamics.

From the off, several things immediately grab me about the sound of the Reference Four. Namely, the crisply focused, expansive soundstage 'picture' they create; the weight and control of the bass; and the speed with which they react to the music, enhancing detail and ensuring rhythms motor along without a hint of blur or overhang. ▶

The 15mm-thick aluminium plate cabinet walls are designed to prevent flexing

Acuflex damping is applied to the soft-dome tweeter to suppress any high frequency break-up modes

IN SIGHT

1 4mm single-wire binding posts

2 Cylindrical risers lift the downward-firing port clear of the baseplate

3 28mm Acuflex-coated silk dome tweeter with titanium former

4 160mm damped polymer composite mid/bass driver, also with titanium former

Play a punchy track such as New Order's *Blue Monday* with its thumping bassline threatening to swallow all before it, and the Fours steal none of the weight while still casting an image of excellent clarity in which every musical element is just so easy to follow.

Even with the mayhem of some vintage KLF tracks, courtesy of the recent Arkive download release – which trawls out some early demos and unreleased mixes – there's that same combination of deft, well-extended bass and masses of information. The music simply powers out of the Fours as it really shouldn't from speakers this small. Big, thundering low frequencies, allied to plenty of detail – spot those contentious samples – what more could one want?

However, you don't have to be crashing out electronica to appreciate what the Reference Fours can do as they're just as convincing with orchestral, chamber or jazz recordings. As if to prove this flexibility, they effortlessly deliver a well-scaled view of the 'band' on Sonoko Miriam Welde's recording of the *Bruch Violin Concerto* Classic LWC while keeping the soloist naturally focused before the listener, and conjuring up an exciting sense of performance. All this and with the bite of the violinist's strings set against the palpable weight of the orchestra behind her.

Similarly with the sparse sound of baritone James Rutherford's reading of Schubert's *Winterreise*, recently released more than three years after it was recorded. Here its absolute focus on the voice and piano really grabs the listener's attention with its chilly ambience – despite being recorded in August in sunny Suffolk!

Staying with events in that county, the Fours do a fine job with the 2020

The cabinet's thick aluminium alloy assembly offers an innate rigidity

Bergen Philharmonic/Edward Gardner recording of Britten's Aldeburgh-set *Peter Grimes*. Yes, in absolute terms it could probably do with a little more low-frequency growl and weight for that celebrated 'Storm' interlude, but for speakers so small what's on offer here is still mighty impressive. In the context of an unfolding drama whose every nuance and twist is illuminated by the levels of insight these loudspeakers deliver, the loss of that last iota of room-shaking ability is a very minor concession.

HOW IT COMPARES

At this price, AVID's Reference Four is joined by a mere handful of very special designs. The most obvious comparison is with Magico's all-alloy A1 (*HFC* 462) at £11k, complete with beryllium dome tweeter and carbon 'nanographene' mid/bass driver – it's a very dynamic and articulate performer with excellent bass for its size. Also at £11,000, Sonus faber's Guarneri Tradition features a carbon-fibre reinforced stand. The beautiful lute-shaped cabinet comes in two wood finishes and the custom foam/paper mid/bass driver works out of a rear vent in the spine of the speaker. It sounds as lush and glorious as it looks!

Conclusion

In practice, those crashing, wind-tossed waves are certainly tumultuous enough considering the diminutive size of those all-alloy cabinets unleashing them, as is the way the Reference Fours portray the unearthly nature of the despairing conclusion to the piece. These are speakers to grab the listener and command attention, and – though they literally have the appearance and mass of heavy metal – they do that regardless of the musical genre being played ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Power; insight; involvement

DISLIKE: Heavy lifting involved in setup

WE SAY: Need small speakers for a big system? Look no further

OVERALL ★★★★★

HENLEY AUDIO

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Mission possible

Mission has evolved its tremendous LX-2 MkII standmount into a fascinating wireless system. ***Ed Selley*** judges the results

The demarcation between 'separate' and 'system' was never a terribly distinct one, but in recent years it has become increasingly blurred. What you see here is a relative of the Mission LX-2 MkII standmount speaker, but where that is a conventional, passive two-way design, the LX Connect is a self-contained system with some fairly radical variations in how it functions.

The critical difference is what happens behind the drivers in the speakers. These are unchanged from the LX-2 MkII and comprise a 130mm composite fibre cone, with complete secondary cone behind it that the coil and motor assembly acts upon, crossing over to a 25mm microfibre dome tweeter. In time-honoured fashion, this is placed below the mid/bass driver to help with time alignment. The crossover is also fundamentally unchanged too.

What has altered is that the crossover dispenses with conventional terminals and instead, each speaker has a 60W Class D amplifier added. With this comes the ability to adjust the bass output via a three-position switch to help with placement. Aside from this and a switch to tell the speaker if it is the left or right channel, on the back of each cabinet there is no connectivity beyond a mains plug.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mission LX Connect

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Wireless streaming all-in-one system

WEIGHT
Hub: 1.75kg, Speaker: 6.55kg each

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
Hub: 225 x 55 x 231mm
Speaker: 200 x 305 x 250mm

FEATURES
- 32-bit/384kHz DSD256-capable USB port
- Inputs: RCA line; coaxial; optical: USB
- AptX and AAC Bluetooth
- 6.35mm headphone jack

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

WEBSITE
mission.co.uk

This is, of course, because the LX Connect wirelessly sends audio from an input collating hub (helpfully called the 'Hub') to each speaker. This is a proprietary system that straddles the 5.8GHz commercial frequency and sample rates up to 32-bit/192kHz can be transmitted without any compression. The presence of those left/right switches is handy as it means the Hub doesn't need to be positioned relative to the speakers; they know whether they are left and right by dint of that setting rather than the Hub needing to be between them.

The connectivity of the Hub is usefully comprehensive too. It's fitted with an analogue RCA input (although, some form of analogue-to-digital conversion will be needed to ensure onward transmission to the speakers), an optical, coaxial and USB input (with Roon certification) that is joined by Bluetooth 5.0 with the full suite of aptX standards and AAC. There is additionally an HDMI ARC connection, making the LX Connect ideal for use with a TV. The decision not to add an actual streaming module might be an annoyance to some, but there is no shortage of ways to get audio into the LX Connect. This connectivity can be looped out via RCA, which can be set to fixed or variable and there's a 6.35mm headphone socket too.

Mission has called upon the services of fellow IAG stablemate Audiolab to help with the Hub. It is built around an ESS ES9018K2M DAC and proprietary circuitry to maximise the effectiveness of the jitter reduction technology that the ESS hardware also possesses. The USB input can actually handle higher sample rates than the wireless system can transmit, but more pragmatically it points to a confidence that the system will handle more conventional sample rates without issue.

For all this, I do have some minor reservations about the LX Connect, one specific to it and one reflective of the technology involved. The specific one is that the conversion process from passive speaker to powered wireless system has taken a £320 speaker and turned into something just shy of a grand. As a package, the LX Connect feels like a competitive offering, but it is hard to ignore the fairly significant price hike between the two devices. More generally, the nature of how the Mission works means that the wireless element of its operation needs to be balanced against both speakers and the Hub needing a mains supply, which some rivals have neater solutions to.

The Connect sounds bigger and more confident than the passive version does

The aesthetics of the LX Connect are appealing, though. Available in both black and white finishes, it feels solidly assembled and sits together as a system very convincingly. The first-time setup of the wireless system works well and is unconditionally stable in use, with the speakers reconnecting to the hub shortly after power is toggled on. Nothing about the Mission feels half-hearted or cobbled together.

Sound quality

Connecting the Hub to a Roon Nucleus (*HFC* 439) via USB, the LX Connect does the most important thing that a wireless system can do in that it draws no attention to the wireless aspect of its operation. Listening to the brooding *Blowback* by Marconi Union sees the music rise from a relatively long silence at the start and there isn't the slightest trace of interference or additional noise as things climb into audibility.

Beyond low noise, the performance is consistently enjoyable too. The Mission is impressively free from the perception of processing in the way it presents music. Agnes Obel's simple but captivating *Riverside* is delivered with a convincing feeling of space around the piano, Obel herself sounding delicate but never insubstantial. Some of the qualities that make the LX-2 MkII such an exceptional passive speaker have also successfully made the jump to the powered version. The live version of *People Get Ready* on the Brand New Heavies' *Shibuya 357* is infectiously energetic and engaging. This is a fundamentally agile speaker and it responds to any time signature with commendable enthusiasm.

Something else which the Mission does with more effectiveness than almost any such system I've tried is demonstrate the benefits of higher res and better recordings. There is always the perception with any such system that needs to process the audio in the way that the Connect does that it will level things out, but the impressive 24-bit/192kHz 20th Anniversary remaster of Air's *10,000Hz Legend* beautifully reflects some of the work that's gone into it. No less usefully, the Mission balances this supreme transparency by still being relatively forgiving of poorer-quality recordings while it's at it.

The move to a powered configuration has brought some necesary changes, though, and some of these are more positive than others. Even with the bass trim switch set to the neutral position, there is a perceivable extra heft to the Connect that allows it to sound bigger and more confident than the passive version does. This is only applicable up to a point, though. Push the Connect too hard and it hardens up more readily than the passive LX-2 MkII does. It's only fair to point out, though, that by the time you reach this point, the levels involved should be louder than most people are going to realistically achieve domestically.

The Bluetooth functionality works well and, while the headphone socket doesn't really compare with a dedicated headphone amplifier, the performance is more than up to some late-night listening. If you're looking for something to double as the output for a TV too, this is an absolutely superb partner, although it is worth noting, if you're using it for both music and TV, it's worth toggling between the 'movie' and 'music' modes in the menu as the former is a real bonus for film and TV but can leave music sounding a little diffuse in comparison.

Conclusion

The Connect is another compelling take on the all-in-one system that has some 'separate sensitivities' to how it works. It's well specified, a doddle to use and can deliver a level of performance that will keep many more conventional options at a similar price point honest. If you feel that the freeing-up of the speakers that the Hub and wireless system offers is of benefit to you, this is a well-executed and very capable-sounding piece of equipment ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The Mission offers similar connectivity to the KEF LS50 Wireless II (*HFC* 479) and, at less than half the price, looks extremely good value. Certain aspects of the KEF's implementation are better, particularly, the use of one of the speakers as an input collator instead of having a hub. This makes for a fractionally more awkward cable installation but reduces the number of boxes (and mains plugs). The KEF also goes louder more effortlessly. Given the price disparity, it is impressive just how close the Mission runs the KEF in more day-to-day activities.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Rich, engaging sound; flexible spec; well made; easy to use

DISLIKE: Hardens up at higher volumes; needs three mains leads

WE SAY: A capable and well implemented system that will work well in a variety of different situations

OVERALL ★★★★½

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Masterstroke

M&D updates its popular earbuds with larger drivers and improved Bluetooth. ***Cliff Joseph*** listens in

It's a couple of years since we reviewed Master & Dynamic's attractive MW07 Plus earbuds (*HFC* 463). The new MW08 doesn't mess with that winning formula, but does refine the design with new drivers and improved Bluetooth and battery. Available in a variety of colours, there's also a £330 Sport edition made out of shatter-proof sapphire.

The basic design hasn't changed, with the same large, lozenge-shaped body as its predecessor. However, the outer casing is now made from a tough ceramic and houses new 11mm Beryllium drivers – compared with 10mm on the MW07. Bluetooth support has been updated to V5.2 and now includes aptX Adaptive and Apple's AAC codec. A new six-microphone system enhances the noise-cancellation features and improves audio quality for voice calls when outdoors. Battery life has improved too, increasing from 10 to 12 hours on a single charge, while the steel charging case allows you to top up the battery for a total of 42 hours.

I find the relatively large earbuds require some adjustment to fit properly, but M&D provides five different sizes of earbuds so most people should be able to get something that works for them. There's also a new Connect app for iOS and Android that allows you to set a sleep timer and adjust the noise-cancellation settings. As well as an 'ambient' mode that lets you hear some of the sound around you, the app also offers 'Max' and 'All day' options. Max is designed for noisy environments, while All Day is for more general use when you're wandering around town. Master & Dynamic quotes a figure of 10 hours for battery life when using noise cancellation and I get a very respectable nine hours on Max.

Sound quality

I begin with Barbra Streisand's take of *Somewhere* from *West Side Story*. This version gives the song a more modern electronic setting and the compact earbuds do a good job of creating an open, ambient sense of space, with very precise placement. Her voice is restrained at first, with a silky warmth that contrasts well with the electronic effects, but then the MW08 takes the gloves off and lands the drums with a tremendous, echoing thud. The sense of space works well as the MW08 stands back and leaves the stage wide open for the final refrain.

Next up, Kate Bush's 2018 remaster of *The Big Sky (Meteorological Mix)*. The MW08 catches the deep rumble and woody texture of the didgeridoo, while the multi-layered percussion is clear and detailed throughout. The slap bass, meanwhile, is a rhythmic delight and the MW08 manages to keep its taut sound in focus even as the cascading drums and chanting vocals pile up all around. The Master & Dynamic catches the tight, swaying rhythm and the shimmering cymbals, and proves that it is more than capable of handling dance music and workout playlists if it needs to.

I am also impressed to discover that activating noise cancellation makes no perceptible difference to the overall sound quality, even when using the strongest Max mode. However, even on Max, higher frequencies – such as voices and lighter background noise – are allowed to leak through a little. It does a much better job handling lower frequencies, however, so it'll be a good choice for travellers who want to drown out the drone of an aircraft or train engine on long journeys.

The MW08 does a good job of creating an open, ambient sense of space

Conclusion

The chunky design of the MW08 earbuds won't suit everyone and the noise cancellation does leave a little room for improvement. However, Master & Dynamic gets the basics right and the attractive sound quality and strong battery life will prove to be particularly beneficial for those audiophiles that travel a lot ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Master & Dynamic MW08

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Bluetooth wireless earbuds

WEIGHT
9g per earbud
81g (case)

FEATURES
- 11mm Beryllium drivers
- Bluetooth 5.2; SBC, AAC; aptX Adaptive
- 12hr battery + 30hr charging case

DISTRIBUTOR
Master & Dynamic

WEBSITE
masterdynamic.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Spacious, detailed sound; good battery life; aptX Adaptive

DISLIKE: Chunky earpieces; no EQ adjustment in app

WE SAY: Great sound and battery life at a competitive price

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Ship shape

The latest iteration of the long-running wireless speaker delivers new refinements and *Ed Selley* decides to take a ride

B&W's Zeppelin has been part of the company's range in some form or another for the last 15 years. What began as a speaker with an iPod dock (which seems rather quaint now, but was pretty radical at the time) evolved into a wireless speaker that removed the physical connections but kept the iconic shape. The latest version continues the trend, offering wireless connectivity with some new twists – support for Qobuz and Tidal (with native MQA handling in the works) alongside Deezer and Spotify Connect.

This is the first Zeppelin to be compatible with hi-res alongside AirPlay and Bluetooth and it has native Alexa support too. Some of the omissions are more mystifying. The Zeppelin can't access a UPnP library on a local network, there's Chromecast support but no physical inputs of any kind so if you were eying it up as a booster for your TV, forget about it.

The iconic shape is retained and the motivation for doing so remains the same. The considerable width of the chassis allows the tweeters to be mounted a good distance apart. These are 25mm drivers with a 90mm midrange unit further inboard, and they operate as left and right channels in the hope that their relative width ensures a degree of stereo separation. These channels share a single 150mm subwoofer to fill in the lower registers. Power is a healthy 240W cumulative.

The result is the Zeppelin winds up being big, but feels niche. At £700, it's cheaper than the Naim Mu-So Qb2, which has Roon compatibility, UPnP and external inputs. Available in dark and light grey finishes, familiarity with the shape has dulled the impact a little but it's still fairly striking. There's a decent control app and build is very good.

Sound quality

Whatever my reservations about the spec, I have no concerns about the way it sounds. The design principle of ensuring distance between the left and right channels pays immediate dividends. Agnes Obel's *Riverside* lives or dies on the creation of a believable space to place her and the piano and it does this with aplomb. Sit on axis with the Zeppelin and it is far more adept at creating the perception of a stereo image in front of you.

With this achieved, the rest of the performance follows in step. Obel sounds delicate but believable and the piano has a weight and scale that some one-box speakers cannot create. Low end weight is never an issue. The bombast of Royal Blood's *Trouble's Coming* is lent real heft without sounding sluggish or overly processed.

There's no shortage of headroom either. It's a slight idiosyncrasy of the volume ramp on the app that the Zeppelin starts to harden up a little at the half-way point, but by the time you're there levels are beyond 'room filling' and into outright loud. At lower levels there is an appealing effortlessness to how it performs. Something else that's relatively unusual for a speaker of this design is the benefits of hi-res are genuinely perceivable. This is achieved without compressed material being unlistenable although very low bitrate music sounds thin and aggressive because there's so little there to work with.

Conclusion

The latest iteration of the Zeppelin is something of an oddity. The decision to eschew UPnP (at least for now) and physical inputs means that some of the roles that its rivals will happily perform are completely beyond the Bowers and Wilkins. There's also the matter of just how large it is – there are some spaces where it simply won't fit. If you do feel you can work with the functionality that the Zeppelin offers, however, there is absolutely no disputing that this is easily the best-sounding one-box speaker I've tested under £1,000 ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin 2021

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Wireless active loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
650 x 210 x 194mm

FEATURES
- 2x 25mm double dome tweeters
- 2x 90mm midrange drivers
- 150mm subwoofer
- 240W internal amplification
- 24-bit/96kHz compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Bowers & Wilkins

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★½
FEATURES	★★★½☆
OVERALL	★★★★½

LIKE: Superb sound for a single box; well-made; easy to use

DISLIKE: Limitations to the spec; size

WE SAY: The feature set might be a little limited for some, but the latest version of the Zeppelin is a superb-sounding speaker

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Mastering the TARDIS effect

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Acoustics Majistra

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 380 x 290mm

FEATURES
- 1x 60mm true ribbon tweeter
- 2x 170mm mid/bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics

WEBSITE
neatacoustics.com

Nick Tate is surprised and delighted by Neat's innovative new Majistra standmounter, and thinks will you be too

Neat Acoustics' Majistra will set you back a lot for a compact standmount – but there's much inside that's interesting. For starters, it's one of very few isobaric speakers you can buy – using a novel approach to getting more bass out of a cabinet than its internal volume would suggest. Then there's the true ribbon tweeter, which is still largely the preserve of the high end, and virtually unique when used together with the isobaric driver complement.

The Majistra is basically a Ministra (*HFC* 465) on steroids. It is perfectly sized for most UK listening rooms, whereas the more compact Ministra might be too small. Bob Surgeoner – the company's designer and managing director – says there's been an 80 percent increase in internal volume, which is a big deal considering the latter had just 10 litres of air to push around inside. In every other respect, it's identical – aside from the mid/bass drivers being 170mm in diameter, 30mm or so larger than the entry-level design. The same type of treated paper cone drive unit is used, both in the one mounted to the front baffle, and the one inside. Above this sits a 50mm true ribbon tweeter that handles everything above 3.5kHz.

The cabinet is ported at the back, but behind the tweeter rather than the rear driver. The latter is still vented to atmosphere, but only by a small aperture. The result is the Majistra has two drivers, one set immediately behind the other, handling lower mid/bass frequencies.

In theory, the Majistra should give a bass performance close to a non-isobaric small floorstander, thanks to its additional internal firepower. Yet it's a pretty compact standmount that can be used surprisingly close to a boundary wall. You'd think this combination of characteristics would make it the default design for modern standmounts, but it's tricky and costly.

There's another downside too. The Majistra requires a decent amplifier, thanks to the low impedance load that it presents, and also its middling sensitivity figure – 88dB/1W/1m

(into 4ohm loads) is quoted, which is 'so-so' by modern standards. So gutsy solid-state amplifiers only need apply, with well in excess of 60W RMS per channel into 8ohm and nearly twice that into 4.

In order to make the speaker as efficient as possible – and indeed sound as good as it can – Surgeoner has gone for a minimalist crossover employing first and second order slopes. All components are said to be audiophile quality, and are hard-wired, point-to-point where possible; high-voltage polypropylene capacitors and low-loss air-cored inductors are fitted. The speaker comes supplied single-wired, but buyers can request bi-wire terminals at no extra cost.

Made in northern England, the cabinet uses 18mm MDF with a choice of Natural Oak, American Walnut, Black Oak and Satin White finishes. The review sample is superbly turned out and makes a taut, dull sound when subjected to my knuckle rap test. Magnetically attached grilles are supplied, but I don't use them.

Sound quality

The Majistra has a lovely, spacious and airy treble and upper midband from its ribbon tweeter, allied to a strong, taut, firm and controlled lower midband and bass from its two isobarically loaded mid/bass drivers. The result is a speaker that punches way above its weight, giving a big, almost grown-up sound despite its relatively diminutive dimensions. This is further aided by its excellent, expansive imaging – again largely courtesy of that exotic tweeter. Even better, it's huge fun to listen to – on account of its great speed and dexterity. Pace, rhythm and timing are present and correct for all to enjoy.

The Majistra's petite footprint means it can be accommodated in smaller spaces

HOW IT COMPARES

Bowers & Wilkins' 705 Signature (*HFC* 476) falls just a little under the Neat Majistra's price at £2,700 – but for once, it can't quite compete. It's a great package, with a gorgeous Datum gloss ebony finish and upgraded crossover. Yet it doesn't quite have the grace, space and pace of the Neat. The B&W standmount has a slightly more cerebral sound that's very detailed and impressively refined, but it lacks the openness and physical punching power of the Neat at high volumes. Still, it plays its hand skillfully and is hard to beat at its price, especially for those with smaller rooms.

As I alluded to, it is a bit fussy about what's it's used with. So I run several amplifiers including Exposure's 3510 (*HFC* 485) and NAD's classic 3155, and get great results from everything that has power and load-driving ability. This speaker has a relatively neutral tonal balance with perhaps a slight peak right up top, but the tweeter is super-smooth despite this and almost flatters poor sources – in the sense that it won't get too harsh on you. Bass is strong and articulate, yet not boomy so you can actually ram it pretty close up to a rear wall.

The great thing about this speaker is that it's highly 'content agnostic' – it worships music, but doesn't stipulate which type. This means you can play a wide range of material and it will really dig into whatever you give it, and present it in a very good light. I kick off the listening session with

The Majistra is huge fun to listen to – on account of its great speed and dexterity

The Association's *Along Comes Mary* – a slice of late-Sixties pop-psychedelia – and it really runs with it.

Although the recording quality isn't special, the Majistra doesn't seem to care. It dives straight into the song's groove, carrying the bass guitar line in a tuneful – and surprisingly powerful – way. This really pushes the song along and gives it a strong sense of purpose. At the same time, the almost translucent midband carries the snare drum and hi-hat cymbal work with dizzying speed. This speaker also excels with the song's lovely vocal harmonies. It gives a really clean and open rendition of this primitive four-track analogue recording, letting me hear right to the back of the mix.

Feed the Majistra a piece of more modern music, like Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*, and it accurately tracks the great Chic-style bassline and delivers a midband that's vibrant with detail. You can listen in and hear all the many production effects or simply relax back and get into that hypnotic groove. By way of a bonus, it serves up a big stereo soundstage with excellent spatiality. Decent recordings are rendered in an out-of-the-box way, making this speaker sound even bigger than it already does.

So is the isobaric Majistra a big bass fest? Well yes and no. What you don't get is a vast, plump, boomy sound – it is far more controlled than that. The isobaric design instead confers upon it a bigger, gutsier nature rather than a fatter or more extended one. It's almost as if the smaller Ministra has had the turbo turned up and is shifting a lot more air.

The result is that you get a surprisingly impactful sound playing music with strong bass content. LFO's *LFO* is a classic slice of Nineties techno and has dizzyingly large amounts of sub-bass blasting in and out – if properly reproduced, that is. This speaker duly does its stuff and rises to the challenge impressively. Even at rather high volumes, it still manages to hold on in a controlled and resolute way bashing out vast tracts of low-end energy without sounding out of breath.

The delicacy of the ribbon tweeter proves a joy with classical music; it resolves treble with sophistication, but the other bonus is its superb tonality. My ageing copy of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* (Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic) is lovely to hear. It serves up a really realistic string tone and the orchestra as a whole seems alive and almost tangible.

There is little sense of either cabinet or drive unit colouration, aside from – in absolute, high-end terms – a tiny touch of nasality in the midband. It's as if the Majistra scythes through all the grunge in the recording to give you a realistic account of the original recorded acoustic. Not for this speaker the clang of a cheap metal dome tweeter or the quack-quack-boom of a poor mid/bass driver.

Conclusion

It might be expensive for a smallish standmount speaker, but Neat's Majistra is extraordinary. It offers a remarkably open, uncoloured and expansive sound for the price, allied to a strong yet controlled bass. The end result is it makes pretty much any type of music big fun. Try to hear it for yourself if you can ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆

LIKE: Musicality; superb treble; compactness

DISLIKE: Nothing at this price

WE SAY: Fiendishly clever, ultra-capable standmount

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

The special one

The smallest of Fyne's 'Special Production' series is a compact standmount that ***Ed Selley*** feels more than lives up to the tag

In a commendably short space of time, Fyne Audio has gone from plucky newcomer to an established contender in the speaker sector. More recently, it has focussed on increasing the number of its models built in the UK. These units – denoted by their 'SP' Special Production badging – are not simply repatriated versions of existing models. This means that the F500SP is a relative of the standard F500 (*HFC* 457), but is not the same speaker made in a different place.

The characteristics are the same, though. The F500SP is a two-way standmount that uses Fyne's preferred driver configuration. This is a coaxially mounted tweeter placed in the throat of a mid/bass driver. The tweeter is a 25mm magnesium compression type. It operates best inside a flare, so is placed inside a metal aperture which then uses the curve of the midrange driver to complete the flare.

The midrange unit is a 150mm 'multi-fibre' cone that features the distinctive FyneFlute surround, which employs variable geometry to dissipate driver energy at the edge of the cone more effectively than a conventional design does. This is augmented by a downward-firing port arrangement. Fyne has kept this reasonably flexible and user friendly by designing the F500SP with an integral plinth that features a cone-shaped section to better manage the airflow from the port. The result is that the cabinet always has the relevant boundary for the port regardless of where you place it.

Where the SP version differs significantly from the standard F500 is the crossover. This makes use of both components and design thinking from the other special production speakers for significantly higher performance. It features a terminal panel that has the opportunity to bi-wire and is also equipped with a dedicated ground post, which is very unusual indeed.

The cabinet containing the drivers and crossover is also different to the non-Special Production version. The sections of MDF used are higher density and then damped by a combination of bonded acoustic fibre and polyether foam. There are more inert cabinets available for similar money to the Fyne, but this is still a rather substantial-feeling speaker. Something else that has changed is that the slats present on the standard

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fyne Audio F500SP

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD):
200 x 323 x 320mm

FEATURES
- 25mm magnesium compression tweeter
- 150mm multi-fibre mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Fyne Audio

WEBSITE
fyneaudio.com

F500 version have been dispensed with on the SP update.

This is the major visual difference between the two F500s, but a host of detail changes mean that the more expensive SP goes a long way to visually justifying the price premium. Three finishes are available; a gloss white and black (which doesn't command a price premium here as it does on the 'normal' F500) and a high-gloss walnut veneer that the review sample is supplied in. Some of the details are slightly fussy – performance enhancing or not, I don't really like the FyneFlute – but the overall impression is a generally positive one. You can legitimately argue that this isn't the most contemporary option going, but it gels very effectively with the looks.

Sound quality

Fyne claims a basic impedance of 8ohm and overall sensitivity of 90dB/W and, while that feels a tiny bit optimistic, nothing during testing suggests this is a difficult speaker to drive. The quoted low-end frequency response of 42Hz (albeit with no roll-off figure given) also augers well for a reasonably room-filling performance. In fact, it isn't the bass response that grabs your attention straight away. The coaxial driver arrangement is one that rarely struggles to create a convincing stereo image, but the F500SP really is exceptional in this regard. So long as a modicum of care is taken with the initial positioning, this is a speaker that vanishes from the soundstage it creates. But that's only half the story. Where it really is a class apart is the three-dimensionality of this soundstage. The perception of depth in stereo is largely illusory, but it certainly feels convincing here.

This means the glorious *Talking Timbuktu* by Ali Farke Toure and Ry Cooder has a, 'there in the room' feel that even some more expensive rivals struggle to get anywhere near. This is backed by an extremely accurate and consistent tonality. The Fyne has no trouble clearly showing up the differences between the various stringed instruments used across the album and Toure's unique vocal style is believably recreated.

The bass extension on offer isn't seismic, but what the F500SP lacks in overall impact it recovers in a qualitative sense. That port and plinth arrangement genuinely seem unconcerned by the placement of the speaker in room and the integration between bass and midrange is consistently excellent. The Fyne delivers commendable detail retrieval across the frequency response and this extends to definition and control of the lower registers that greatly aids their perceived realism.

HOW IT COMPARES

The F500SP is £500 more expensive than the talented Sonus faber Lumina II (*HFC* 478) and, once the higher quality all-wood finish of the Fyne is priced in over the simpler Lumina which only uses wood on the front, the performance of the two designs is interesting. The Lumina has no real answer to the stereo image and depth the Fyne produces; few at the price do. By the same token, the Lumina II has an agility and rhythmic engagement that the Fyne struggles to match; it's simply more fun more of the time. Both speakers share a port arrangement that makes them easy to place. In the end, it comes down to whether you prefer three-dimensionality over thrills.

The caveat to this is that the F500SP is happier with the sort of time signatures at work here than with more high-tempo content. Listening to the gloriously energetic *The Sound Of Violence* by Cassius, the Fyne is never actively slow or dull but this is not a speaker that delivers the sort of urgency that some rivals can. The upside to this is that less frenetic music never feels forced or relentless and the ability of the standmount to latch onto a time signature is consistently good throughout.

As long as care is taken with its setup, the F500SP vanishes from the soundstage

Some of this can be partially ameliorated by sensible electronics choices. Even with the wholly propulsive Naim Supernait 3 (*HFC* 456) being used, the Fyne is never truly ballistic, but the time it is on test coincides with both the NAD C 700 and Roksan Attessa streaming amplifier being here and the performance with the NAD is definitely a little more energetic than it is with the extremely refined Roksan where the overall balance comes down a little too far in favour of refinement and smoothness to be truly engaging. The C 700 by contrast is still admirably refined, but there is enough energy in the upper registers to be that little bit more compelling. In all cases, though, the peerless creation of a stereo image never falters.

In part, this is because the F500SP is extremely forgiving. It is genuinely tricky to provoke into sounding bright or forward in any way, even with less than stellar masterings and recordings. It can go impressively loud too, without any perceivable strain and even when its performance envelope is exceeded, it concedes gracefully. While I feel the sensitivity measurement might be a little overstated, there is little arguing that this is a genuinely easy speaker to drive. None of the amplifiers it is connected to during testing have to work particularly hard to hit room-filling levels, making this a fine choice for anyone short of headroom.

Conclusion

More than simple sensitivity, though, it's the all-round capability of the F500SP that consistently impresses. So long as a modicum of care is taken with partnering equipment, this is a speaker that avoids any tendency towards shock and awe to deliver an exceptionally spacious and refined performance that combines with the excellent build and design to make it a very capable option ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Superb imaging and depth; tonally excellent; attractive; well made

DISLIKE: It's not the most ballistic speaker

WE SAY: An accomplished all-rounder likely to work brilliantly in a wide selection of systems

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

In plume

Sendy isn't well known here and is still setting up UK distribution. ***Cliff Joseph*** thinks the Peacock might change all that

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sendy Audio Peacock

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Over-ear, open-back planar magnetic headphones

WEIGHT
578g

FEATURES
- 88mm drivers
- 2.2m cable with 4.4mm balanced connector
- 6.3mm and XLR adapters

DISTRIBUTOR
TBC

WEBSITE
sendyaudio.com

Sendy's parent company, Sivga Audio of China, makes a wide range of affordable headphones but, as the rather hefty price of this one suggests, it concentrates on the more luxurious end of the market. And, like its namesake, the Peacock certainly wants to make an impression. The plain cardboard box it arrives in looks relatively modest, but inside you'll find the headphones and accessories wrapped in a large carrying case, complete with chunky bronze zips and buckles.

The Peacock takes its name from the fan-tail design of the steel grille on the large open-backed earpieces, which are made out of wood and finished with 24K gold trim. Each houses an 88mm planar-magnetic driver that claims 20Hz-40kHz frequency response and is mounted on a rigid frame made of aviation-grade aluminium. The brackets and hinges on the headband are made of the same aluminium and you can't help but notice how heavy it is when you put it on for the first time. Thankfully, the adjustable headband and foam-padded earpieces help to take the strain, and it doesn't take too long to get used to.

There's a mini-XLR connector on each earpiece, with a detachable 2.2m, 8-core copper cable that ends in a 4.4mm balanced connector. Sendy also includes 6.3mm and XLR adapters. The lengthy braided cable is a bit of a handful, so a second, smaller cable wouldn't go amiss. There are no other accessories, but the open-back earcups means the Peacock is designed for use with a high-end system, rather than on the move with mobile devices.

Sound quality

Pairing the Peacock with the balanced 4.4mm output from iFi's Diablo DAC (*HFC* 474), I am immediately struck by the deep, mournful tones of the double bass introduction to Górecki's *Symphony Of Sorrowful Songs*. It captures the rich, wooden texture of the strings as they wind forward, painfully slowly. There's a great sense of atmosphere and space too, and you get a real feel of the acoustics of the concert hall as the headphone picks out tiny background sounds and movements in the hall. Portishead singer Beth Gibbons' voice is a little deeper than a conventional soprano, but carries great warmth and depth of emotion, and that 40kHz upper frequency range is wonderfully bright and clear, allowing each note to hang in the air with painful stillness.

After this even the rumbling tones of Leonard Cohen seem cheerful, and again I am struck by the sense of space created by the Peacock on *You Want It Darker*. It is precise and evocative, while the striking bass riff – always surprisingly slinky and sensuous – is full and firm, and I am impressed by the sharp, staccato percussion that adds an urgent edge to the mood. The Peacock reveals all the rumbling depths of Cohen's voice, capturing its warmth and the rasping undertow on the deepest notes, as he mourns: "a million candles burning for the love that never came".

The Peacock can clearly do mournful, but it's equally adept strutting it stuff as I discover with The Rolling Stones' *Start Me Up*. There's an energetic swagger to the opening guitar riff, matched by the snarl of Jagger's voice and yet the Peacock understands that it's the precision of the bass and drums – and those crisp, sharp handclaps – that set the course and keep the song on track.

Conclusion

The high price of the Peacock obviously means that this is far from a casual purchase, and many people may prefer to wait until they can try the headphones for themselves in a showroom. But if your budget can stretch to £1,300 and you have a comfortable listening room, this luxurious offering is a satisfying and worthwhile investment ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE	★★★★½
OVERALL	★★★★½

LIKE: Clear, precise sound; impressive open soundstage

DISLIKE: Expensive; heavy; long, heavy cable

WE SAY: An impressive open-back headphone that provides immense clarity and a great sense of space

- STORES NATIONWIDE
- DEMONSTRATION ROOMS
- EXPERT IMPARTIAL ADVICE
- UNRIVALLED PRODUCT RANGE

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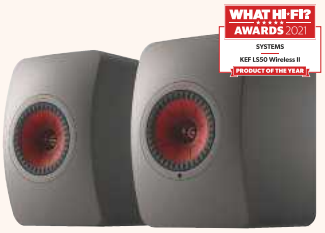

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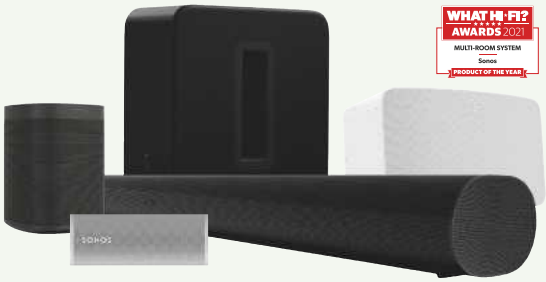

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Hi-Fi Choice EDITOR'S CHOICE

High concept

Q Acoustics bridges the gap between its affordable and premium ranges – borrowing from both. ***Ed Selley*** judges the result

Sometimes, the 'obvious' product that a company should make can be a long time coming. The circa-£1,000 speaker market is booming and you might have thought it a natural hunting ground for Q Acoustics. Some 15 years since the introduction of its original Concept range, the company is a recognised force both at entry-level price points and – thanks to the Concept 300 (*HFC* 448) and 500 (*HFC* 426) – at more premium ones too. Until recently, the space between these two points was less well covered, but the Concept 30 is the smaller of two speakers intended to bridge this gap.

As you'd no doubt expect, the engineering that the Concept 30 employs can be seen as a gently simplified version of the more expensive 300, but that does rather underplay how much of it is all new. The 25mm soft dome tweeter and 125mm doped paper mid/bass driver are very much in keeping with what you would expect to find in a Q Acoustics design, but have been specifically developed for this range. The focus for both has been resonance control. The tweeter is placed in a hefty metal frame that helps to drop the resonance to 700Hz (or, well beyond the point it actually operates at). Care has also been taken to limit the back pressure it experiences.

The mid/bass driver also has a large front frame to assist its relationship with the front panel. The size of the voice coil may have been increased, but – thanks to the use of copper-coated aluminium – the weight of the overall assembly has not. The quoted frequency response of the Concept 30, however, is far from spectacular; Q Acoustics claims 54Hz-30kHz at +/-6dB, but the results in room suggest that lower figures can be bettered in reality.

The cabinet also takes thinking from existing models, but combines it with some new stuff too. The sides, rear and top are made from the 'gelcore' process of layers of MDF separated by a non-setting glue that absorbs vibration and converts it to heat. This is a double layer rather than the triple offering you'll find in the larger Concept models, but it still makes for a very inert-feeling speaker. Where the Concept 30 breaks new ground is the baffle is a separate assembly made of 3mm-thick aluminium attached to the main cabinet. The lower section of the Concept 30 is also separate, taking the form of an aluminium chassis; itself made of multiple, damped layers. The crossover is placed on this 'raft,' isolating it from the exertions of the speaker itself.

Some other aspects of the design have been seen before. The bracing arrangement takes the same 'point-to-point' principle as seen in the larger speakers, but modifies the idea so one of the internal braces acts as the mounting point for the drivers. You can also bi-wire the Concept 30 and links are supplied for those that don't wish to. The optional FS75 stand that first appeared with the Active 200 speaker is recommended, but at £325 a pair is a fairly expensive add-on and gives each speaker a considerable footprint due to the splayed legs it relies on for stability.

The rest of the industrial design is excellent, however. The visual cues all

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics Concept 30

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD): 180 x 284 x 319mm

FEATURES
- 25mm silk dome tweeter
- 125mm paper mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

convey that it is unmistakably Q Acoustics, but the manner in which it's been done is wholly in keeping with the £900 price point. The decision to use a painted finish in particular is one that I think works extremely well and the silver of the review sample is a very strong choice – although more traditional black and white options are also available. The build quality is also immaculate; it is impossible to know that the front panel is a separate section by carefully examining the cabinet and everything feels carefully considered and well executed.

Sound quality

The Concept 30 is an undeniably simple speaker to drive. In its time on test running alongside a Naim Supernait 3 (*HFC* 456), the amp's volume knob barely passes 9 o'clock for all but the most ballistic of listening. As well as pleasantly benign characteristics, the standmount puts in a sensational performance. The work that the company has expended on its design means that it does a fine job of creating a cohesive, consistent and entirely believable soundstage, which the cabinets themselves are able to simply disappear into.

This is a trick that benefits pretty much anything you play. With the wonderfully immediate *The Moment I Said It* by Imogen Heap, it manifests Heap as a physical presence, slap-bang in the middle in a way that feels natural but can be maddeningly hard to replicate, even with more expensive hardware. Push it firmly in the other direction and select the vastness of Daft Punk's *Recognizer*

HOW IT COMPARES

The Concept 30 has a more ornate and sophisticated cabinet than Sonus faber's Lumina II (*HFC* 478), as well as superior bass and it does a better job of vanishing from the presentation. It's also better made and £100 cheaper. The Sonus faber puts up a decent fight. Its clever plinth-mounted port ensures it is less fussy about placement and there is a midrange energy it possesses that the Q Acoustics (and pretty much anything else at the price) has no real answer to. By a small margin, the Concept 30 is the better all-rounder, but the Lumina II remains a quite fabulous performer.

The gelcore cabinet design is quite beautiful

and the sound expands far beyond the physical location of the speakers while remaining no easier to tie down in the presentation itself.

With this neat attribute in place, the Concept 30 builds on it. The decision to stick with relatively 'low-tech' drivers results in a speaker that sounds consistently correct with voices and instruments. There's a uniformity to how it handles a wide spread of material that points to it being very hard to unsettle. You can argue that there are more revealing rivals at this price and there are certainly ones that are more ebullient (see How it compares), but for the usefully unflappable ability to do justice to both excellent recordings like the 24-bit/88.2kHz download of Dead Can Dance's *Spiritchaser* without leaving the not remotely audiophile *Out Loud* by the Boom Boom Satellites sounding hard and brittle, it has no match. Even with listening levels firmly bordering on anti-social, the Concept hardens up a little, but does so only gracefully.

An undeniably simple speaker to drive that puts in a superb performance

And it's not done there. The seamless integration of the drivers and absence of any perceived air management from the rear bass port feels fast, rhythmically engaging and, above all, fun. The glorious cover of *Rated X* by Jules Buckley and the Heritage Orchestra is a delight because the fundamental qualities it possesses work together almost perfectly. The scale of the track is well handled ensuring the orchestra has the space it needs. Individual instruments reveal believable tonality and enough definition to be easily perceivable and, having stitched this all together, the Concept 30 then proceeds to have the whole creation positively fly along with all the carefully recaptured swagger firmly in place. Without ever sounding forced when not playing lively material, this a speaker that has absolutely no issue with enjoying itself.

Conclusion

The Concept 30 is magnificently free of issues full stop. It places no great demands on your partnering equipment, is commendably unfussy about where you place it and it manages to look fantastic once you've done so. Q Acoustics has taken engineering and thinking that have come to define it, further tweaked the details and delivered a product that can keep any standmount I can recall testing at £1,000 honest, while saving you £100 into the bargain. The result is a sensational speaker that needs to be on any shortlist at the price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Sensational blend of accuracy, refinement and fun

DISLIKE: Fussy and expensive stand

WE SAY: An outstanding speaker that barely puts a foot wrong, the Concept 30 is a superb performer

OVERALL ★★★★★

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Vinyl countdown

Garrard's retort to Japan's new wave of Seventies budget belt-drive turntables was unfortunately too little too late, says ***David Price***

A time of great social change, the Seventies saw the UK finally begin to face the brave new world of global competition in industry and consumer goods. As the rapid decline of both UK car and motorcycle manufacturing at that time showed, we simply weren't ready…

The onslaught from Japanese companies was too strong for many British brands, aided and abetted by a Yen that was – until around 1980 – dramatically undervalued. One of the major casualties in the hi-fi world was Garrard – which had been a seemingly unassailable turntable manufacturer in the early Seventies, but by the end of that decade was in terminal decline. The 125SB was its attempt to stave off the flood of affordable belt-drives from Japan, from around 1975. It was the ailing Swindon company's second-from-bottom turntable in its range.

Costing £45 in 1976, the 125SB was well made for the money, albeit

A brief history of Garrard

1932

Garrard launches its first turntable, while Lalo Schifrin, Patsy Cline, Little Richard and Johnny Cash are born

1976

Garrard unveils the 125SB turntable as Bono, The Edge, Adam Clayton and Larry Mullen Jr. form a band called Feedback

1978

Garrard replaces the 125SB with the GT35 and The Blues Brothers make their first appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in the US

1981

Garrard ends turntable production in the UK as the remaining members of Joy Division form New Order

rudimentary, and had a dependable idler drive system that – by the time of the Mk4 – boasted a wow and flutter figure of 0.2 percent and a DIN B rumble figure of -55dB. By modern standards, these figures are terrible. At the time, a figure of under 0.1 percent was reckoned to be low, and rumble needed to be at least -60dB for it not to be distracting. Yet thanks to its idler drive and decent build, the SP25 MkIV was robust and soldiered on for decades after they'd been purchased, with zero maintenance.

The next year, Garrard dragged the SP25 up a notch with the MkV, making it look swisher. But it was the 125SB that was tasked to take on rivals from Japan. It was deliberately a belt-drive design in the budget end of the market and it turned in a considerably better measured performance than the SP25.

Rumble in the jungle

Garrard claimed the 125SB had a wow and flutter figure of 0.16 percent and a DIN B weighted rumble figure of -59dB. This was a useful improvement on the SP25, albeit not the match of the likes of Pioneer's PL-12D.

The 125SB may not have compared well to its Japanese competition, but – mistakenly perhaps – Garrard had its corporate gaze fixed on its existing customers. To them, this new offering was a big improvement on the SP25 MkIV. In truth, it was more of a ruse to "sell up" Garrard buyers to something swisher than an ageing, older-generation SP25, than it was a challenger to the PL-12D.

To the Swindon company's credit, if you'd come from an elderly Garrard auto changer, the 125SB looked crisp and modern. It came as standard in a fibreboard plinth covered with a wood grain-effect vinyl wrap. It had a smoked acrylic dustcover, which was quite a high-quality affair with friction hinges.

The tonearm was S-shaped, but a poorer quality item than its Japanese rivals. It had the option of being supplied with a Shure M75 6SM moving-magnet cartridge. This was a popular design, much in fashion in 1976. With its spherical stylus, the M75 6SM could be tracked from 1.5g to 3g.

Tracking force and bias adjustment were provided, along with a useful cueing lever. Interestingly, the bias adjustment scale has two calibration marking ranges, the second being marked 'CD4' for quadraphonic-capable moving-magnet cartridges – something whose time had already come and gone by 1976. Unlike its Japanese rivals of that time, the deck was fully automatic, offering selectable record sizes (7in, 10in and 12in) and selectable repeat operation, although you could use it in a manual way should you wish.

It's fair to say the Garrard was decently made. Its pressed steel top plate is nicely finished and the 'deep formed' 280mm-diameter aluminium platter is a fair piece of work. The speed control and on/off mechanisms are surprisingly slick. The main bearing isn't much less robust-looking than you'd find on a Technics SL-1200 Mk2, for example, and its multi-point sprung suspension gives very good isolation from footfall. This underlines the idea that this was a sensibly designed, well-made turntable built to keep working for a long time and able to stand up to some abuse from ham-fisted users.

What it lacks in subtlety and insight, it makes up for with a basic musical charm

Compared with a modern Rega Planar 1, for example, the Garrard 125SB is a pretty lo-fi device with a vague and squishy sound. What it lacks in subtlety and insight, it makes up for with a basic musical charm that just gets the job done. Fitted with a modern budget Audio-Technica AT-VM95C moving-coil cart, it is pleasant enough to listen to, with reasonable speed stability and fairly unobtrusive noise levels.

Slick speed adjustment for 33 and 45rpm discs

BUYING ADVICE

The 125SB is a decently made, built-down-to-a-price product that was aimed foursquare at a quality-conscious, non-specialist consumer that might today buy a Sonos streaming system. The difference is that this was completely designed and built in the UK, of course. It's robust, durable and made to take abuse in the field – more so, I would argue, than budget specialist hi-fi turntables of today.

Most examples on sale today – from around £15 to £100 – are non-runners. There's a high likelihood that there is a snapped or stretched belt that's fallen off the motor drive spindle. These are cheap and easy to replace, with new belts selling on ebay from £5. The only other wear item is the cartridge; a shiny new £39 Audio-Technica AT-VM95C works a treat in the rudimentary tonearm of the 125SB.

Wash of sound

The great thing about low-end vinyl is that through a decently made deck such as this you still get a lot of what makes the format endearing. True, it is more vague, less dynamic and detailed, but there's still a big wash of sound across the speakers that gives a pleasing, warm and expansive end result. That's very much what the Garrard did and still does. Compared with a Pioneer PL-12D I have to hand, it's less incisive, less three-dimensional and more muddy sounding – yet is still fun, especially playing period seventies LP releases. It's perfectly alright for a second, retro-themed budget system.

The 125SB only survived for a couple of years before it was replaced by the GT35, which was a far more modern looking – but arguably less well-built – affair. By 1978, teak-effect plinths looked as old as the ark, and the market was moving on apace. This was not enough to reverse Garrard's fortunes, and in 1979 the company was sold to Gradiente Electronica of Brazil. The brand soon stopped producing turntables.

Garrard's illustrious story of turntable manufacturing began back in 1932, but its inability to properly respond to the fast-changing environment of the late-Seventies meant that it was already effectively done for by the time the 125SB was launched in 1976. These days, it's a fascinating relic from a long-gone past – that's also still quite nice to play vinyl on ●

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THIS MONTH

ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.

NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.

JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.

DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".

CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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Needle work

To quote Spandau Ballet; "to cut a long story short I lost my mind"… Well I kind of did a few years back and a big part of my recovery from mental health difficulties was the rekindling of my love for vinyl. At 55 I'm of an age that if you wanted music in the past you had to buy it on vinyl or at a push, cassette or indeed get a mate to bung an album on a tape for you.

So I already had a dormant record collection, which has grown exponentially over the last few years as I've been well and truly bitten by the vinyl bug and yes upgraditis has also set in up to a point. It brings me so much joy and more importantly gives me something to look forward to doing and it's made other parts of my life fall back into place. One must never underestimate the power of music!

Neville reckons Ortonfon's 2M Black LVB 250 is ideal for Ian's Pro-Ject deck

However, there is a question at the end of all this. The last few years have seen me upgrade, piece by piece from an ageing Sony belt-drive deck, Yamaha receiver and Monitor Audio Bronze B2 speakers to a Pro-Ject X2 turntable, Musical Fidelity MX-VYNL phono stage, Musical Fidelity M2si amplifier, Monitor Audio Silver 50 speakers, REL TZero MKII subwoofer, Lehmann Audio Linear headphone amplifier, Grado 3000e headphones with QED cables and interconnects.

All in all, I'm very happy with my current setup and I think the upgraditis is almost cured, but I am looking at changing my Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge that I have been living with for the last couple of years and that I'm on my second stylus with. The 2M Blue has been fantastic, but I'm looking for something that is warmer and gives more of an 'analogue' feel. Sometimes I find that the 2M Blue can be a tad bright or even 'digital' sounding? Too clinical at times maybe? I have a broad taste in music: rock, indie but also a lot of jazz and movie soundtracks.

I've been looking at various cartridges, but have found myself drowning in a sea of 'dynamic compliance' and 'tonearm mass' *etc*. whether to go for moving coil or stick with moving magnet?

I used to have an affinity with Audio-Technica. Then there's Hana, Goldring, Grado, Sumiko…

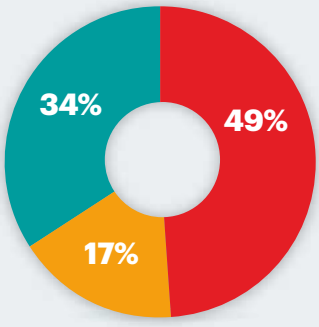
Ian Forster, by email

JK: Music is the ultimate mental health balm, it should be a prescribed ▶

WE ASKED…

Do you use a dedicated hi-fi stand?

- Yes, I use a dedicated hi-fi stand I bought 'off the shelf'
- Yes I use a bespoke stand that I had made for me
- No I have my setup stacked on regular furniture



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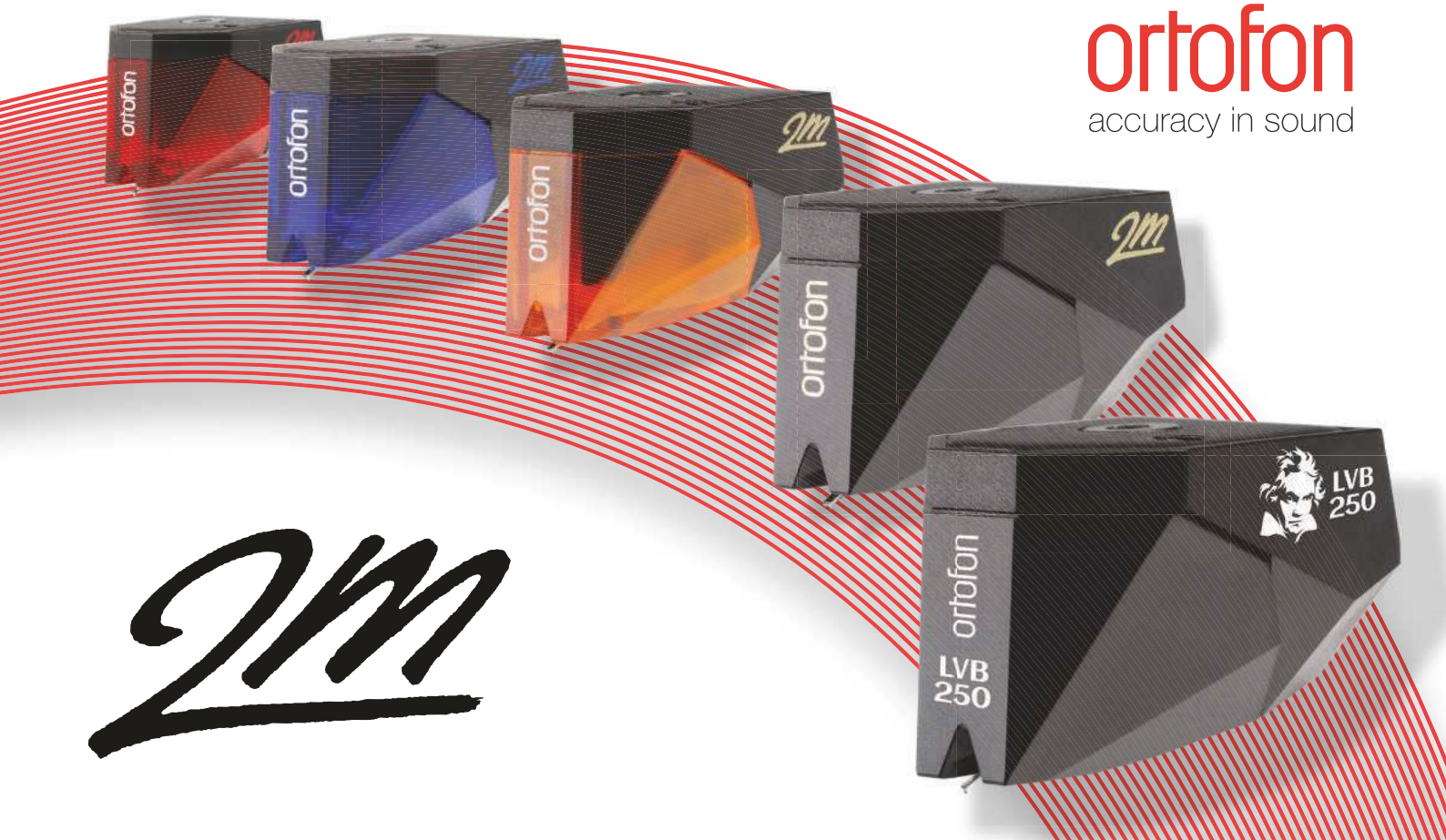
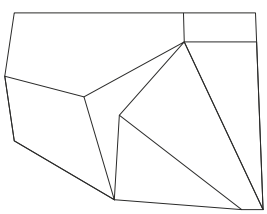
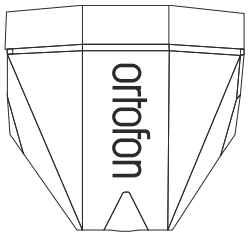
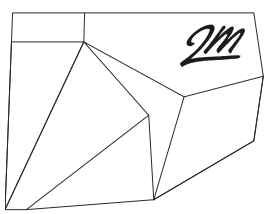


2M

The 2M Series, so named after the abbreviation of Moving Magnet cartridges (MM), features Ortofon's split-pole pin technology for a flat frequency response, a high output for easy integration into any system and a striking visual design inspired by the facets of a diamond. Beginning with the **2M Red**, a reliable all-round performer with an open and dynamic sound, and moving up to the popular **2M Blue** with its nude-mounted elliptical stylus; the range is great for those looking for quality vinyl sound on a budget. Through the **2M Bronze** and **2M Black** models, the bigger budget delivers upgraded cartridge body materials and even more impressive stylus profiles for true high-end sound experiences. The award winning **2M Black LVB 250** sits at the top of the range thanks to its Shibata diamond, nude mounted on a boron cantilever for an intricate, delicate and detailed sound performance that simply cannot be beaten.







2M Red

September 2013 — May 2007

2M Blue

September 2013 — May 2007

2M Black

September 2020 — December 2011

2M Black LVB 250

September 2020 — May 2021 — EISA Award 2021 — April 2021

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treatment Ian. I know what you mean about a relaxed and warm-sounding cartridge, but suspect that much of this balance is coming from the rest of the system which doesn't look all that mellow from here. However if you stick a Grado Black into the Project's tonearm I imagine this might give you the balance you desire, this affordable MM is very relaxed and warm. If you can afford a bit more and would like to keep more of the detail of the Ortofon, seek out a Goldring 1042 (below),which is as sweet as a nut.

ES: The Pro-Ject arm is a good match for a wide spread of cartridge designs so there aren't many brands which can't be encouraged to work with it, although something that you might want to consider is that the arm is set for the relatively tall 2M and many of the cartridges you mention are shorter than the Ortofon is which might affect your VTA. If it was my money, I still haven't found a better sub-£500 cartridge than the Audio-Technica OC9 family. The Musical Fidelity phono is well able to handle them and they're simple to fit. Once done, they balance warmth and bite quite beautifully.

NR: As you say, there are so many options to choose from out there. Your Musical Fidelity MX-VYNL phono stage supports both MC and MM cartridges. If you wanted to stick with Ortofon and an MM cartridge, then do consider the excellent Ortofon 2M Black LVB 250 (*HFC* 478). It has a quoted compliance of 22cu (either 22μm/mN, 22mm/N, 22 x 10-6 cm/dyne or simply 22cu for Compliance Unit – it is all the same!), which only just nudges the cartridge into the high compliance category. This makes it compatible with low to medium mass tonearms, so should be OK in your tonearm. The tonearm on your Pro-Ject X2 has an effective mass of 13.5g, which puts it at the high end of a medium-mass arm. However, I'd consider moving to a MC cartridge to get the more refined sound that I think you are looking for. The Hana SL, for example, has a compliance of around 17cu, which places it in the medium compliance category, so it should give great results in your tonearm.

CW: It's important for all of us to ensure that any upgraditis is focused on bringing heightened pleasure and enjoyment, rather than potentially bringing extra stress or anxiety around making tricky, subjective and pricey decisions that could so easily go wrong. I think this is particularly true for vinyl playback, as the medium is also the most fraught for accidental damage to stylus, cartridge, tonearm or record, or all four. I personally find many Ortofon cartridges to be pretty well balanced. I don't believe the X2 turntable is adjustable for Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA) as it is factory setup, ready for success, but in my experience the angle of the cartridge to the record surface can have a large bearing on the timbre of the sound. If the rear of the cartridge is lower than the front this can accentuate bass frequencies and if the front of the cartridge is lower than the rear this can exaggerate treble lift. Even playing thicker or thinner records will change this, not to mention the addition of any after-market platter mats. I'd just check this before you venture into any new cartridges.

Column inches

My hi-fi pet gripe is modern floorstanding speakers, those boring-looking cubical columns. I rue the day that wide format cabinets gave way to fashion and these skinny nondescript towers became popular. Who made them popular? Who made them fashionable? Surely not any hi-fi or music enthusiasts!

In the early Nineties, I was looking to replace my Leak Sandwich three-way units, but the slender tower designs had already begun to take over. This limited my choice considerably, I found nothing to match the bass response of my Leaks. However, there was plenty of choice if I wanted brain-piercingly high frequencies, usually from metal-domed tweeters.

Eventually I discovered the Ruark Accolade. Here was a speaker that out performed the Leaks in all frequencies. Also they are beautiful to look at. The master crafted cabinets are mounted on their own substantial base, someone described them as looking rather like a lectern – none of your slender, unstable looking rectangular column here. I have lived and loved these speakers for 30 years and dread the day they will need to

I have loved my Ruark speakers for 30 years and dread the day they need replacing

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Yamaha's hefty NS-5000 bucks the trend of slim cabinets that Alan finds so offensive

be replaced because I hate modern towers, especially as they are incapable of producing reasonably low frequencies.

I am keen to identify a potential replacement for the Accolades and would welcome any advice or suggestions. My system consists of: Michell GyroDec/303 arm, Benz Micro ACE cartridge, Naim Stageline phono amp, Innuos Zenith Mk3 2TB network player, Naim NAC 202 preamp, Naim NAP 200 power amp and Chord Qtest DAC.

Alan Wenbourne, by email

I blame the progress of convenience over performance for narrower speakers

***DP*:** You and me both, Alan. I've never quite got the fashion for multiple, small-diameter drive units set into a narrow but tall front baffle. I am assured by speaker manufacturers on the record that this arrangement is just as good as one large 12 or 15in bass unit, but off the record a number of speaker designers are inclined to say the complete opposite.

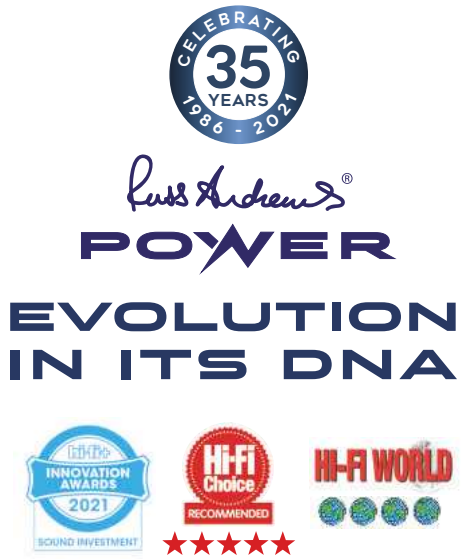
Of course, it all comes down to how well the drive units, and indeed the speaker cabinets, are designed and made – so one can't get too prescriptive. But I do think that this fashion – started by loudspeakers like the Mission 753 of the mid-Nineties – is more about style than sound. Actually, to be fair, it's more about domestic acceptability than style – because for many spouses, as far as hi-fi is concerned, less is more.

There are precious few old-school 'wide baffle' speakers – so it's hard to make recommendations if I don't know your budget – but I'd invite you to think in terms of the Spendor Classic 1/2, JBL L100 Classic, Klipsch Heresy IV and the Yamaha NS-5000 (*HFC* 431). These all have a very different sort of sound to your average floorstanding tower speaker – bigger, more atmospheric, easier and far less strained.

***JK*:** The fashion for slim floorstanders came about largely for aesthetic reasons, most people didn't want wide baffles in their living rooms any more. They have acoustic benefits as well, of course, but the balance isn't as rich as older designs. There are a few companies that make the sort of speaker you are after, however. Among these I would include ATC whose SCM19A (*HFC* 413) offers many of the characteristics you are after, albeit from a cabinet that while not particularly wide has a similar aesthetic balance to the Ruark Accolade you're so fond of.

***CW*:** I'm also a fan of wider baffle designs. There's something about the imaging that can just feel far more natural. I blame the narrowing of speakers on the relentless progress of convenience over performance. Early audiophiles would have thought nothing peculiar in pouring shuttered concrete in the corners of their listening rooms to form vast ceiling to under floor horns that could sound effortless while shaking your fillings out with seismic bass. I reckon the slippery slope may have started with the rise of the interior designer in the Sixties and Seventies. Aesthetics trump physics all too often! The other problem is the rise of the accountant, who will always look for any opportunity to reduce production costs, irrespective of the sonic price to pay. Fear not though, there are still plenty of wider baffles to be appreciated. Check out Audio Note's ranges and the Heco Direkt that I loved back in *HFC* 407.

***ES*:** The long-running but fearsomely capable ATC SCM40 (*HFC* 480) has a 164mm bass driver and very few people seem to feel it lacks impact. ▶



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Alternatively, you can go full retro and look at something like the Elipson Heritage XLS15 or JBL L82 Classic (*HFC* 473), which are 'full width' in all senses of the word!

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Streaming help

I am for a bit of advice if possible with regards to streaming hi-res audio to my all-Cyrus system. I have found a few very good internet radio stations (check out: superstereoradiochile.com, radioparadise.com/player, frequence3.com and intenseradio.net).

I am currently using an Avantree DG60 dongle to stream from my Widows 10 laptop to an iFi ZEN Blue, connected to the Cyrus DAC XP Signature via digital coaxial cable.

The problem is the DG60 has a maximum sample rate of 48kHz and I want to stream 96kHz. I have spent hours searching on the internet for a suitable USB 'dongle' (or USB-connected device) that can meet the transmission rate, but can't find anything. Would you happen to know of anything I can use?

Alan Bridgens, by email

JK: Hi Alan, I too am a fan of internet radio albeit mainly for the ability to find stations that play unusual yet interesting music. The problem with your quest is that the quality of signal from these stations is not hi-res in the strict sense, it's usually an MP3 or similarly compressed format. Add to this that Bluetooth cannot transmit 96kHz and you'll see that it's hard to improve on what you're currently getting without a dedicated streamer. I suspect that you will get best results with a Cyrus Stream XA (*HFC* 376) connected preferably by Ethernet to your router. This will get you the best results from any streamed service.

NR: As Jason suggests, unfortunately it's not as simple as a faster sample rate equating to better quality over Bluetooth as there are limits on what can be transmitted over the Bluetooth standard. Other issues such as

The dongle I use to stream from my PC won't stream at 96kHz, why?

component quality and choice of codec (aptX, AAC, LDAC for example) can affect sound quality, as can the digital signal processor (DSP) that is used. Most Bluetooth audio chipsets used in receiving wireless devices are equipped with a DSP that implements equalisers and other things designed to 'improve' the sound. Listeners can be fooled into thinking that they can hear the differences between codecs, when in reality they are just listening to different DSP settings. So, that's a long-winded way of saying that I've not come across a Bluetooth USB dongle that supports more than 48kHz at this point in time.

ES: I'm not sure of anything that can easily do this. My gut feeling would be to check if they're all covered in the BluOS operating system (Radio Paradise certainly is) then hop on ebay and look for a Bluesound Node. The previous Node 2/2i (as well as the current version, naturally) had MQA compatibility for the Radio Paradise stream and can output over coaxial or optical into the Cyrus and negate the need for the PC to be on at all.

Nasty noise

One of the albums that I received as a present for Christmas was

iFi

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ZEN CAN
Headphone amp

ZEN DAC V2
USB DAC and headphone amp

ZEN Phono
MM/MC phono stage

ZEN Blue V2
Bluetooth DAC

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WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ — iFi ZEN CAN — March 2021

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ — iFi ZEN DAC V2 — 09/2021

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ — iFi ZEN Blue — April 2020

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EISA AWARD — Best Product 2020-2021 — BEST VALUE DAC — iFi Audio ZEN DAC

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avforums BEST IN CLASS AWARD 2021 — iFi Audio ZEN Phono

Surface noise as a studio effect is not a new thing and there are many guilty parties adopting it

***Californian Soil* by London Grammar on CD. I play all my music from a dedicated server in FLAC format. I ripped the CD using dB Poweramp, however on playing it some tracks have 'clicks' and apparent surface noise. I re-ripped it, but it is still the same. The surface of the CD is pristine, so I wondered if they had followed the practice of some 'cowboys' in the very early days of CD and mastered it from vinyl – but that would be ridiculous. Before I rejected it as faulty, I Googled it and there is some suspicion that the 'surface noise' has been added intentionally for some reason. Have you heard anything about this?**

If that is the case, it has ruined what is otherwise a good album. This type of distracting noise was the very reason that I ditched vinyl shortly after the instigation of CD in the first place!

Ian, by email

ES: Hi Ian, yep it's there deliberately and if you think it's irksome on digital, you should try the vinyl. I'm afraid that 'surface noise as a studio effect' is not a new phenomenon. Massive Attack's wonderful *Teardrop* has it and Lemon Jelly use it almost as a form of percussion in some tracks. It's a creative decision and one that we have to accept from time to time.

DP: The ripping algorithms that dBpoweramp and its ilk use are sophisticated and designed to get a bit-perfect rip from CDs. They employ lots of clever tricks to do this, and will go back time and time again – at very high speed of course – until they're sure they've got exactly the digital audio stream that was put onto the disc in the first place. So if you're hearing clicks and noise then it can only be added on purpose, in the studio, I would suggest. Actually this practice isn't as unusual as you might think – I remember De La Soul doing it in the late-Eighties, for example. Techno pioneers like Manix have also simply taken samples from crackly old records and chosen to not digitally remove them, again for effect. Some of us are used to snap, crackle and pop because we play vinyl on a daily basis, but it seems to be much easier to ignore than this same noise added on digitally, in post-production.

JK: As my esteemed colleagues have already noted, it's not uncommon for artists to give their clean digital recordings a bit of an analogue feel by adding vinyl style surface noise. Sometimes this works well, but it can also be irritating. It's a pity because previous work from London Grammar has sounded spectacular.

CW: A modern CD would not be mastered from vinyl. It will almost certainly be a digital master or rarely an analogue master tape. I have heard discussions about the sounds of digital watermarking used to protect certain digital sources from being exploited, but in this instance I think it's an aesthetic judgement by the band, to give it the authenticity of vinyl. Go figure. It's a retro nod to the noise that you've always sought to eradicate

NR: The producers have clearly added surface noises and clicks to many of the tracks for some strange reason. I think your only solution is to treat your digital rip to the same treatment that you would use for a worn LP. Audacity's free program has some excellent noise reduction and click removal tools built in, under the Effects tab, which I'm sure will go a long way to restoring the recording for you.

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Timeless tapes

Neville Roberts discovers that there's a wealth of high-quality vintage tape recordings available for the tapeheads among us, and some that can sonically rival vinyl

I've mentioned before on these pages (*HFC* 459) that I was invited to give a talk on tape recording at The UK Hi-Fi Show Live at Ascot Racecourse in 2019. Also presenting was Ken Kessler from our sister publication *Hi-Fi News*, and during his talk he played a commercial tape from 1958 that sounded amazing. Chatting with Ken afterwards, he mentioned he'd come across this and several other tapes for sale on an online auction website. I was so impressed, I decided to track down a copy for myself.

The tape in question was a Capitol recording tape ZD-19 from 1958 entitled *Velvet Brass Presented By Jackie Gleason*. This was a stereo 7.5IPS two-track reel-to-reel tape for in-line heads, which pre-dates the commercial standard of four-track for domestic stereo pre-recorded tapes, where you play one side then turn the tape over to play the other. The expression 'for in-line heads' simply means a two-track stereo tape that must be rewound before playing, which is the standard for professional tapes. It's worth mentioning that you can play two-track tapes on a machine that was designed for four-track, bi-directional tapes. However, you will only be using half of the available tape width, which will reduce the sound quality, and there will be a volume imbalance between the left and right channels due to the alignment of the tracks on the tape.

Ken also played the original soundtrack of *The Sound Of Music* with Julie Andrews, which had an equally stunning sound, so I started searching for 7.5IPS two-track open reel tapes for in-line heads of either classical or jazz music. Over the coming months, I came across several 7.5IPS two-track tapes – all of which were from the US. One caught my eye – a Sonotape SWB 7019 from 1957 of three pieces of music by Albert Ketèlbey played by the Vienna State Opera Orchestra under the baton of Armando Aliberti. The three tracks were *In A Chinese Temple Garden*, *In A Persian Market* and *Bank Holiday*. When the tape arrived, I noticed that Sonotape had misspelt the composer's name as 'Ketelby' on the label, so I was a little concerned that the content would not be what I was hoping for. I needn't have worried – right from the opening drum solo of *In A Persian Market* through to the full orchestra, the sound quality was superb. The tape has quite an amazing breadth and depth to the soundstage and there is negligible hiss. There is no hint of elaborate multi-micing techniques on this recording, so I suspect that a simple coincident pair of mics were used in front of the whole orchestra as the acoustics of the environment were captured really well.

When I found the tape, it sounded as I remembered with a huge dynamic range

I finally spotted a copy of the 1958 Capitol ZD-19 tape I had been looking for – once again, on sale in the US – and bought it. It sounded just as I remembered, with a huge dynamic range and great instrument positioning. Vinyl versions are, of course, available but these tapes have superior dynamic range and instrument positioning.

Neville's much sought after *Velvet Brass* tape from 1958

Keeping it reel

One characteristic I noted was a realistic soundstage with the instruments distributed evenly across it. This is unlike many of the stereo releases that followed, which are very 'left and right' with the instruments coming from either the left or right channels to show off stereo sound.

I am fortunate to have a rare 1968 stereo copy-master tape of the Franco Chiari Quartet. This was never released in stereo and most of the original master tapes were recorded in mono. However, one of their sessions, which was released as a mono LP, contains several tracks recorded in stereo. This demonstrates the very 'left and right' sound of early stereo recordings, with the vibraphone and piano on the left and the double bass and drums on the right. The last two tracks are quite disconcerting via headphones, but I can forgive the engineer as they are superb pieces of jazz.

If you are into Fifties and Sixties music, tapes from this period can offer a real insight into the original quality of this music, even on commercially available releases. If you have a two-track stereo tape machine, I strongly recommend keeping a watchful eye on the online auction sites as there are some real delights to be found ●

NEVILLE ROBERTS
Tape head

The opinions expressed in these pages are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of *Hi-Fi Choice* or AVTech Media Ltd.

Boxset madness

Spring cleaning grips ***Nigel Williamson*** as he mercilessly culls a lifetime's collection

Nigel's loss is quite clearly Oxfam's gain

I'm not really a decluttering sort of guy. In fact, let's be honest, I've always been a hoarder – although I prefer the classier term 'collector'. As a 10-year-old, my suburban bedroom housed vast collections of stamps, coins, match box labels and albums full of cards depicting animals of Africa or flags of the world, given away with packets of tea.

Then I discovered collecting records, starting with 45s but soon graduating to LPs (*A Hard Day's Night* in 1964 was the first). Once I decided I liked an artist, I had to own everything they'd ever recorded. If Bob Dylan played uncredited harmonica on three tracks on a 1962 album by obscure folk-singer Carolyn Hester, I had to have it.

Later there were collections of Wisden Cricketers Almanacs and Charlton Athletic programmes dating back to way before I was born, and more recently rows of alabaster busts of classical composers. Somebody gave me Mozart and so I had to get Beethoven. And then Wagner… and so on. Some call collecting a bug. In my case, it's more like a virulent disease.

Over the years, however, it's the records that have grown to be by far the largest collection, partly because as a reviewer I get them free and because I cannot bear to get rid of them. When asked by family members why I keep records I am unlikely to ever play again, I look at them pityingly and tell them they just don't understand.

Chucking stuff out was almost as much fun as it had been collecting it

Then a few weeks ago as we entered a new year, I began to think the unthinkable: perhaps 2022 is finally the time to have a clear out. I'm not sure what triggered the thought. It could have been having to empty the house of my late mother, a monumental task that took days and made me think I really shouldn't leave my children to have to go through this when my time comes. But I think the real turning point was probably the news of a 30th anniversary edition of Nirvana's *Nevermind* spread over eight vinyl LPs.

At 49 minutes and seven seconds, *Nevermind* was a perfectly formed album of classic grunge to which you wouldn't want to subtract or add a single note. But hey, if you want all the songs on the album another four times in live versions from various concerts, then you will probably think the eight discs are worth your £180.

When I looked in my record cupboard I discovered the 20th anniversary edition of the album – a four-CD-plus-DVD set with alternate mixes, rehearsals, radio sessions and another live set. I had put it in there 10 years ago and not only never played it since, but forgotten it was there. In that moment the full insanity of boxset madness dawned on me and I knew the *Nevermind* had to go.

Once I'd taken the first, faltering step towards decluttering, the second discard was a lot easier – what was the point of keeping a seven-disc Eagles boxset from 2005 when I had all the albums individually, anyway? After that, I rather began to enjoy myself. Chucking stuff out was almost as much fun as it had been collecting it.

Shady business

An expanded boxset of *Achtung Baby* with a pair of replica Bono shades? The question was no longer: 'do I want this?' but: 'why did I keep it in the first place?'. The idiocy of the wraparound glasses annoyed me so much that I became merciless with anything which contained worthless trinkets and tried to pass them off as valuable collectibles.

A Michael Nyman boxset that came complete with a disembodied piano hammer? There's got to be someone down the Oxfam shop would like that. An eight-disc set of Jerry Lee Lewis' Sun years? I don't think I even managed to listen to all of that when I reviewed it. And so the cull went on. King Crimson, Fela Kuti, The Doors… all artists I love, but whose oeuvre I really don't need to own more than once across duplicate boxsets and deluxe editions.

Years ago, Ry Cooder's record label asked me to compile a multi-disc career retrospective covering his session work, studio albums and film soundtracks. A lot of effort went into the tracklisting and I was devastated when he nixed the idea, telling his record company they could do it after he was dead. Now I'm beginning to wonder if he was right.

However, I had to draw the line somewhere and the 36 disc box containing recordings of every concert on Dylan's 1966 world tour is still on my shelf. Meanwhile there are still two more cupboards I haven't even started on yet… ●

NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Reformed hoarder

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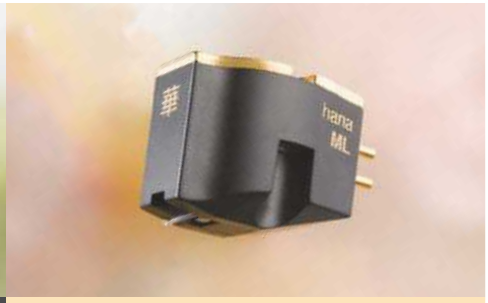

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The power of dance

Unlucky for some, budding bingo enthusiast ***Steve Sutherland*** salutes an innovative scheme that's using its patrons' heat to make nightclubbing carbon neutral

Apparently, a typical night at Bongo's Bingo consists of: "several rounds of bingo interspersed with rave intervals, dance-offs and catwalks down tables. It's essentially bingo played over pitchers of cocktails and beer, with frantic dancing to Nineties pop music and celebrity entertainment." Sounds utterly brill, right? Sadly, our Scottish pals couldn't partake as planned over the new year because all Hogmanay celebrations were banned North of the border due to COVID. What makes this cancellation doubly tragic is that the venue hosting the double B bash was Glasgow's SWG3, an ecologically minded arts space that is working hard to put in place a radical new plan to heat and cool the building using its audience's body heat.

The first of its kind to be installed in Scotland, BODYHEAT does exactly what it says on the tin. It uses heat pumps and fluids to capture the body heat generated by the clubbers, channelling their combined energy through conventional air conditioning to a series of 12 150m-deep bore holes drilled beneath the venue's garden area to create what you might call a thermal battery. This can then either be used immediately to cool the audience or stored under the ground until it's needed to warm up the building.

According to the venue's bumf, the human body radiates about 100W of excess heat when doing not much of anything at all so the enormous amount of warmth that people dancing at clubs or gigs generate is significantly more and is currently just ejected into the atmosphere as waste. The BODYHEAT system utilises this, so that the venue gets to consume minimal electricity and gas on site and, in turn, minimises its carbon emissions. Based on the number of people who set foot in the space across one year, SWG3 estimates it'll save around 70 tonnes of C02 annually.

After lockdown, the longing to be in a room full of people struck a chord

Andrew Fleming Brown, the venue's Managing Director, elaborates: "There's no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has brought huge challenges to the events sector around the world, but it has also created a seismic jolt across businesses – underlining the need for a stable and sustainable future. BODYHEAT is our contribution to a global issue, and will help us to dramatically decrease our energy consumption – bringing us one step closer to becoming a carbon neutral venue in the not-so-distant future.

"Lockdown really helped capture the imagination of everyone because we've been forbidden to go into these places for 18 months and I think the longing to be in a room of thousands of sweaty people on the dance floor struck a chord when we launched the system. The great thing about this project is that it talks directly to our audience and it's accessible where people can come to a gig or a club and contribute to this system."

Can you feel the heat?

The concept for the whole project came from David Townsend, from TownRock Energy. He's been working with SWG3 since 2019 trying to work out alternative solutions for heating and cooling the venue.

It's getting hot in here...

Other potential uses for the energy created would be to warm up the artist's studios at SWG3 and also provide heating for any potential new builds on the horizon.

Mr Fleming-Brown is also mindful of the recent sharp rise in costs of fuel and energy bills : "We need to find places to put this excess heat and if we can heat our spaces then that becomes a really viable system."

With that in mind, SWG3 isn't just sitting selfishly on its asset and is more than keen to share the project with other Glasgow venues to see what positive impact they can also have on their urban environment.

"Over the next 12 months we are committed to building a solid foundation upon which we can transform our organisation into a more sustainable one," adds Mr. Fleming-Brown. "We know this won't be easy, but we understand the severity of the climate emergency, as well as our potential to influence our community, industry and beyond. We want to lead by example."

All being well and lockdown being lifted, SWG3 plans to implement BODYHEAT in late February. Bring on the bingo! Oh, and the beer of course! ●

STEVE SUTHERLAND
Legs eleven

Picture credit: Bongo's Bingo

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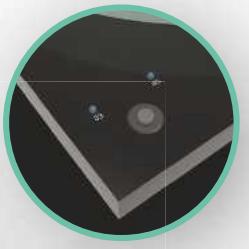

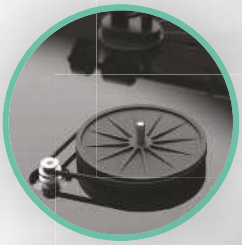

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DESTINATION: THANET

GHOST PAPA

It's a tale of two cities – Margate and Ramsgate – for ***Simon Berkovitch***, but the song remains the same in these record shops for bookworms on the Kent coast

To be honest, if it wasn't for the pandemic, the shop might never have happened at all," explains Kier Wiater Carnihan, the friendly face of Margate's Ghost Papa. It's one of two coastal haunts for book lovers and music fiends – along with Ramsgate's June Bug – to have sprung up in recent months. "The fact our lives had already been turned completely upside down made the prospect of a massive move (from London) less intimidating," he adds. "In normal times, we might not have had the guts to take such a risk."

Open Wednesday to Sunday, Ghost Papa draws on Kier's 15 years' of experience buying and selling records and books in the capital. It's a spacious treasure trove of pre-loved vinyl, new releases from local heroes, cult literature, graphic novels and so much more.

A visit to Margate in 2020 with his partner Sara provided the inspiration for the coastal venture. Sara was interested in buying somewhere in the area, which she knew well. She'd recently inherited some money after the unexpected passing of her dad and wanted to do something life changing with it. "We were browsing The Margate Book Shop just as they were taking delivery of a washing machine for the owners' flat upstairs. And we both had the same thought: what if we bought somewhere that had space for a shop downstairs?"

At the time, Kier was still working at Music and Video Exchange in London as a buyer in the chain's record and book shops, so had experience aplenty for such a venture.

The idea was filed away under 'pipe dreams' – until December, that is, when Sara found 105 Northdown Road listed for sale online. Unexpectedly, it ticked all the boxes: "Not only did it look amazing, it was already a record shop," explains Kier, as it had been Transmission Records since 2015. "We loved it even before we'd viewed it in the flesh".

"Margate has a lot of record shops for a small town, so I'm chuffed I've earned a few regulars"

Fast-forward to July 2021. Ghost Papa – a loving nod to Sara's late dad – is flinging open its doors, mere days after Kier and Sara set up home upstairs. "It was a mad rush," Kier recalls, "but there was an open-day party on Northdown Road that day, and it made sense to open when the street was busy."

The paint was still drying on the sign when the first customers trooped in. "I hadn't had time to price half the stock," Kier says. "I ended up just shoving things out and pricing them when people brought them to the counter." Despite the stress, it was worth it: "The shop was packed for six hours straight and everyone was incredibly positive. We might never have takings that high again!" This DIY spirit continued through the early months of trading. "Since then, we've had time to make things a bit more organised, although it's still pretty ramshackle."

Ghost Papa is split 50/50 between recorded media and books and comics, "In total, I think we have about 2,000 LPs and 12ins in the racks at any one time, plus a few hundred 7ins, CDs and cassettes," Kier says. "I've got about the same amount in reserve, plus new stuff coming in all the time."

Although 99 percent of the shop's stock is second-hand, not all of it is used. "I've picked up a fair amount of unplayed records from auctions and sales," Kier explains. "I'm also stocking a few bits and pieces from local labels. I'd definitely be interested in bringing in new stock from distributors, but might wait until our turnover is a little higher."

There's an eclectic mix of music in the racks too. "It's partly because that reflects my taste," Kier explains, "but also, when you're buying bigger collections, you inevitably end up with pretty diverse stock."

Welcoming and accessible, Ghost Papa draws in a mix of punters. "There's everyone from veteran heads looking to fill gaps in their vast collections, to young families having a casual browse on their way to the beach," says Kier. "It also helps that Cliffs, a ▶

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Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

Every record shop worth its salt should have an inhouse cat

The Guns N' Roses pinball machine is a welcome distraction

café just down the road, stocks lots of records. All the diggers from there tend to drop in here too, and *vice versa*."

Online crate diggers: check out Ghost Papa on Discogs to get a taste of its esoteric treats. "I've just started selling there recently," says Kier. "I have only had time to stick a few pricier items up so far, but I'll be listing more in the coming months. For niche items – stuff where it's relatively unlikely that someone's going to walk through the door looking for it – it's a godsend."

Kier's not a huge collector in the "obsessive, completist, know-the-matrices-by-heart

"Instagram has been brilliant. We picked up a few hundred followers almost immediately"

sense", but he's happy to admit that he did get excited when someone sold him a lovely pressing of The Beatles' *Revolver* featuring the withdrawn mix of *Tomorrow Never Knows* recently. "I am in two minds whether to keep it or not. Margate has a lot of record shops and dealers for a relatively small town, as does Ramsgate, so I'm quite chuffed that I've already earned quite a few regular sellers. Maybe I'm just paying out too much!"

Some of the priciest stuff in store has been more modern, however. "There's everything from limited edition pressings of current artists Clairo and Kendrick Lamar, to random Nineties releases by Octopus, Alisha's Attic and Adorable that always turn out to be worth way more than I would ever have expected," he explains. The three most expensive records in the Ghost Papa racks now are a limited edition MF Doom album on red vinyl, a collaboration between Sun Ra associates Marshall Allen and Kash Killion in a gorgeous silkscreened sleeve, and *No Easy Rock & Roll* by Cambodian Space Project.

Kier's happy to sing the praises of social media in flying the Ghost Papa flag. "Instagram has been brilliant. We picked up a few hundred followers almost immediately and tend to get good engagement there – on a few occasions I've put a record on there and received DMs almost immediately asking to buy it. We have profiles on Twitter and Facebook too, but it feels like both of those platforms have had their day when it comes to promoting small businesses."

Looking forward, Kier will be doing a show for Margate Radio – tune in at 3pm on the second Sunday of every month for two hours of tunes directly from the shop floor. "A few customers have suggested selling coffee and merchandise. We'll also have a party to celebrate Unified Goods (unifiedgoods.com) moving into the mezzanine soon," he says. "A couple of very interesting names might play – so watch this space."

This affable record shop owner is full of enthusiasm for the future and is proud of the present. Not only has Kier quickly made Margate his home, but he's also determined for Ghost Papa to become another community hub for the town.

"What I'm most pleased about is that we serve the whole community," he says. "Margate has absorbed a huge influx of DFLs – Down-from-Londoners – like us in recent years, and I didn't want the place to feel too geared towards that demographic at the expense of others. I try to keep our prices reasonable and our stock broad to encourage this – and it seems to be working. One of the best things about music is how it can transcend class and cultural divides. Our customer base reflects that" ●

CONTACT DETAILS

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Instagram: @ghostpapamargate
Twitter: @GhostPapaMargs
Phone: 07745 000703

JUNE BUG

Just along the coast in Ramsgate, June Bug is a delight for crate diggers, bibliophiles and comic aficionados alike. Located until very recently on Ramsgate's bohemian Addington Street, the store – named after the Melvins song – was trading as a pop-up for a few months. The quest is on for more permanent premises in the town, so watch this space.

"I am a primary school teacher by trade, but after 15 years at the white-board I thought it was time to try something new," says June Bug's Peter Finn. "I'd been considering trying to open a used vinyl, book and comic store for a couple of years, but it wasn't until I relocated from London to Kent that it became a possibility. I saw the space advertised, and then we had a month to prepare. It was a busy time!"

With its mix of cult tomes and alternative sounds, June Bug combines Peter's twin passions. "Of course, you don't need to be an avid reader to be a frantic crate digger, but I'm sure many people are in thrall to both music and literature." There's everything from punk, psych, death metal, jazz, reggae, dub and Seventies rock to cult writers – the Beats, Ballard, Phillip K Dick and more. "I've just done a show on Ramsgate Radio that looks at the links between (The Fall's) Mark E Smith's lyrics and writers that inspired him," he adds.

Peter's home hi-fi setup graced the pop-up: "A Marantz PM6007 amplifier, Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Evo turntable and Wharfedale Diamond 10.1 standmount speakers."

All vinyl (around 1,200 records) is used, but it's likely that June Bug will stock new records in the near future once settled into its new home. Peter also plans to trade on Discogs. "We advertise locally, and we've had perhaps three or four collections in since we opened." One of those contained an original pressing of Master of Reality by Black Sabbath, including the seldom-seen poster.

Despite its cult collections, June Bug is for everyone: "We get everyone from the vinyl obsessives who remove the record from the sleeve and examine the LP with the intensity of a tea-leaf reader, to people who are not remotely interested in the pressing details of the records – they just want the music."

Keep up to date on June Bug's progress and details of new premises by following them on Instagram at: @junebug_ramsgate.

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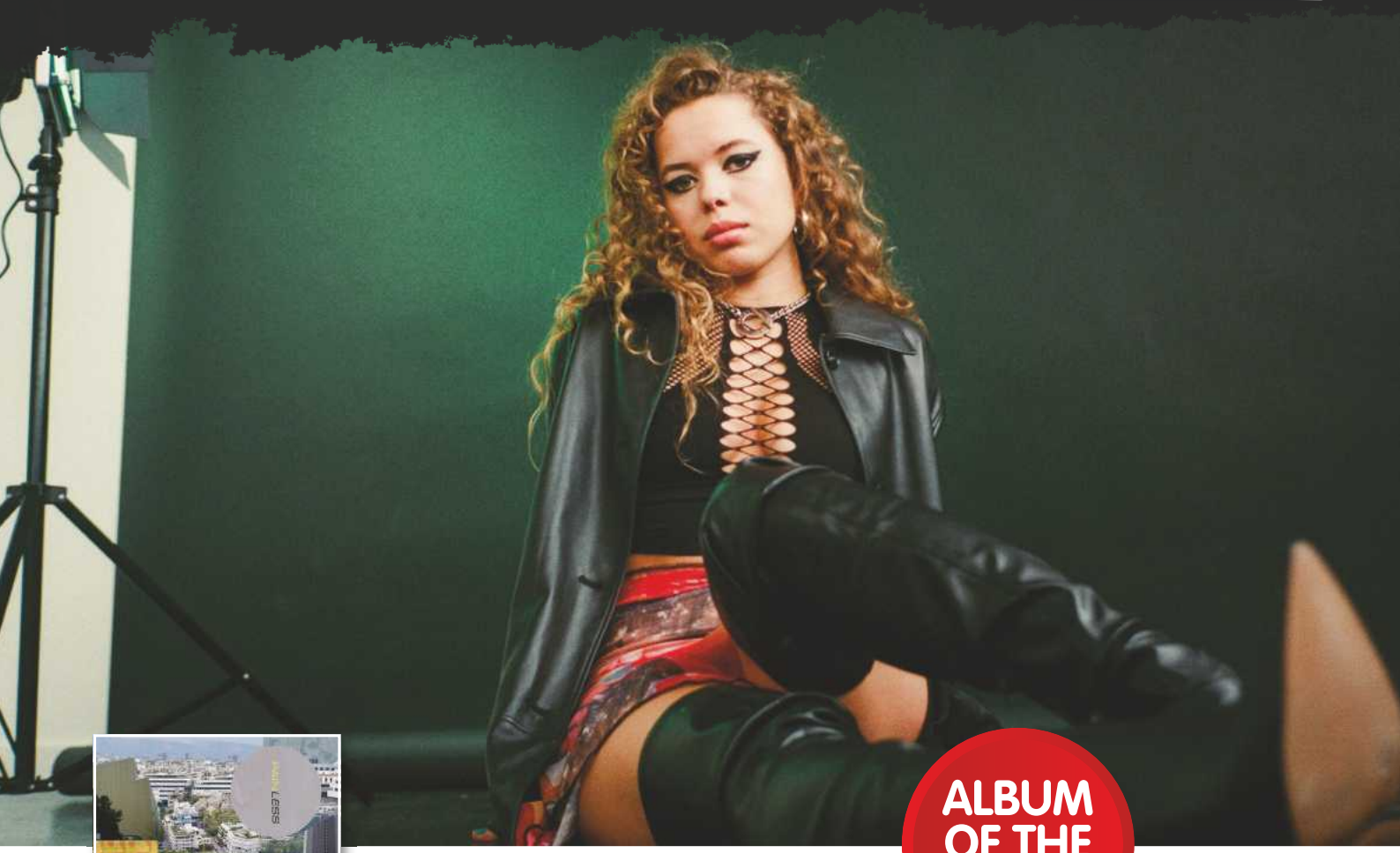
Musicreviews



Nilufer Yanya
Painless

★★★★★

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

CD **ATO**

BORN IN LONDON 26 years ago to an Irish-Barbadian mother and a Turkish father, Nilufer Yanya may be the embodiment of modern multi-cultural Britain but she's built her career in the old-fashioned way. Her debut album, 2019's *Miss Universe*, arrived not on the back of internet-fuelled hype and a social media campaign, but was the culmination of years of gigging in small clubs, acoustic demos on Soundcloud, self-released EPs, support slots for like-minded artists such as The xx, and Sharon Van Etten, and finally signing to an independent label which allowed her the space to hone and develop her songcraft. "I certainly wasn't thinking: 'how am I going to make a TikTok hit?'" as she succinctly puts it.

Miss Universe earned rave reviews for its exhilarating shapeshifting between indie rock, smooth jazz, trip-hop and radio-friendly pop as her expressive voice and whip-smart songs marked her out as an exciting young female talent bound for glory and one to watch for the future.

Then the pandemic hit. What followed wasn't exactly two wasted years as she spent the time writing and recording the follow-up *Painless*. But the timing was certainly unfortunate: just as she should have been out there, building on the good impressions, headlining larger venues, appearing on TV and getting herself seen and noticed, the world went into lockdown. Otherwise, she might well have been a household name by now.

That she isn't is perhaps a blessing in disguise for it means her second album arrives without the burden of expectation and with a sense that here's an artist who is still fresh and exciting and awaiting to be fully discovered.

Recorded between a basement studio in Stoke Newington and her Uncle Joe's Riverfish Music in Cornwall, *Painless* is a collection of prickly, post-punk alt-rock with reference points ranging from Pavement and PJ Harvey to Portishead and Tricky. If it's less idiosyncratic than her debut, it's more robustly self-assured, from the looped, industrial beats of *Chase Me* to the trip-hop of *Midnight Sun* via the off-kilter pop of *Belong With You*, jangling harmonics of *Shameless* and hypnotic guitar riffs of *Stabilise*.

Singing in a voice that can change register from deadpan to rapture in a moment, the songs unflinchingly tackle life's existential challenges – broken relationships, how you can be lonely in a crowd, anxiety, the search for one's true self and a place in the world... all the sort of universal stuff that's often painful but makes us stronger and without which there is no journey of self-discovery.

Remember the name because you're going to be hearing an awful lot more of Nilufer Yanya over the course of 2022 and beyond. ***NW***

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Hurray For The Riff Raff

Life On Earth

★★★★½

CD **Nonesuch**

BORN AND RAISED in the Bronx before she ran away to New Orleans, Alynda Segarra's last album, 2016's *The Navigator*, was an ambitious, politically charged concept about an outsider's search for identity. The follow-up takes as its theme how to survive in a world in flux. Inspired by Adrienne Maree Brown's book *Emergent Strategy*, with its "transform yourself to transform the world" mantra, Segarra describes these 11 new songs as: "nature punk", framing her own restless experience against our

Traces of her early Americana sit beside jazzy beats and programmed drums

relationship with the natural world and: "how we can make an earth that can survive a little longer". In places, you can hear traces of her early Americana albums, but she's dramatically expanded her sonic palette to layer songs such as *Wolves* and *Jupiter's Dance* with synths, jazzy beats and programmed drums. As an activist and poet with a rebel punk heart, she emerges as the Patti Smith of her generation. Yes, she's that good. ***NW***

Cate Le Bon

Pompeii

★★★★½

CD **Mexican Summer**

THE FOLLOW UP to 2019's Mercury-nominated *Reward*, *Pompeii* is Welsh songstress Cate Le Bon's sixth full-length album and, true to form, it's a beguiling mix of gothic doom artrock and soaring – albeit warped – folk. Le Bon is a serious talent – that we already know – and the nine tracks offered up here demonstrate her ear for strange melodies, off-kilter chords and confident yet delicate vocals. Expect horns stabbing away on tracks like *Dirt On The Bed* and gentle Eighties-style indie on *Harbour*. All in all, there's a whiff of St. Vincent – albeit a mellower, more introspective version – which all adds up to a strange, heady brew. ***PH***

Beethoven

Variations And Rondos

Vladimir Feltsman

★★★★½

3x CD **Nimbus Alliance**

WHAT'S THE DEAL with Ludwig van Beethoven and writing variations on a theme? The German composer definitely had a thing about it and, fortunately, was exceedingly good at it. This three-disc set (at the price of a single disc) contains everything bar the *Diabelli* variations as well as many short works that were unpublished during Beethoven's lifetime. That might imply lesser-quality music, but actually most of what's here is high-quality Beethoven. Pianist Vladimir Feltsman plays everything with conviction, infectious enthusiasm and a formidable technique. The recording sounds bright clear and detailed. ***JH***

A collection of big hitters from start to Finnish...

Scenes From The Kalevala

HOT PICK

Lahti Symphony Orchestra

★★★★★

SACD **BIS**

THE KALEVALA IS a collection of Finnish folk poems and legends curated in the early 19th century. It had a huge influence on artists, writers, and musicians from Finland. This fascinating disc brings together music inspired by the Kalevala by four Finnish composers (Jean Sibelius, Leevi Madetoja, Uuno Klami and Tauno Pylkkänen). The main work is Klami's *Kalevala* suite, but also included is an early version of Sibelius' *Lemminkainen in Tuonela* that's not previously been recorded. The BIS SACD recording is wonderfully rich, pungent and very detailed, with excellent attack, broad dynamic contrasts and it's nicely atmospheric too. ***JH***

AUDIOFILE VINYL ★★★★★

Andy Bey

Experience and Judgement

HOT PICK

180g vinyl **Speakers Corner**

SINGER AND PIANIST Andy Bey comes from the numberless ranks of unsung heroes whose names have been overshadowed by the stars of their era. A child prodigy, Bey made his first album in 1952 at the age of 13, but it took another 22 years before he made this remarkable album for Atlantic Records. Bey's voice is rich and sonorous, perfectly suited to the soul jazz vibe of *Experience* and *Judgement*, songs which speak of spiritual freedom, consciousness and even a little romance.

Bey's band includes bass player Wilbur Bascomb who Jeff Beck fans will know from *Wired*, and his contributions lend a strong funk to the proceedings next to keyboards and percussion from songwriter Bill Fischer and some sweet licks from Richard Resnicoff on guitar.

The album has a strong analogue sound, it's a little thick in places and benefits from an open and revealing system, but the mellow yet uplifting vibe will get through regardless. Bey has an unusually positive style, he really exudes warmth and love, which explains why he made a series of 'self help' albums with Horace Silver in the Eighties and Nineties. Original copies of this command high prices and it's easy to hear why. ***JK***

Picture credits: Andrew Akasha Rabut (Alynda Segarra)

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Kendra Morris

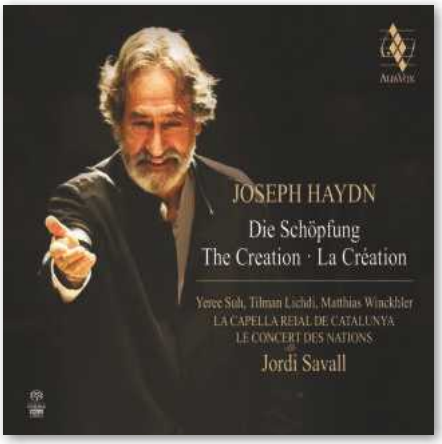
HOT PICK

Nine Lives

★★★★★

CD **Karma Chief/Colemine Records**

THIS IS A classy slice of modern-day soul with retro stylings that gives it a timeless quality. *Drag On* is a soul cracker that burns a long fuse before the strings, drums and Morris' vocals pull you in by the lapels. *Dry* beguiles with the pep of a classic Diana Ross confection. As each track follows, I find a new favourite. *Got Me Down* tips its hat to Lesley Gore's *You Don't Own Me,* but there's so much fresh creativity in this music comparisons soon drop away. And *Penny Pincher* is the soul smoocher you won't want to live without. This is consistently good music that deserves the widest audience. ***PSH***



Fresh and engaging, it sounds like everyone involved is having an absolute blast

Joseph Haydn

Die Schöpfung

Yeree Suh, Tilman Lichdi, Matthias Winckhler, La Capella Reial De Catalunya, Le Concert Des Nations

★★★★★

2x SACD **AliaVox**

HERE'S A VERY enjoyable period instrument performance of Haydn's marvellous *Die Schöpfung*. Taken from a series of concert performances, the music is fresh and engaging, and it sounds like everyone was having enormous fun and enjoying the experience. The live recording is wonderfully clear and detailed, while being tonally natural and exceptionally transparent. You notice this in particular right at the very beginning, where the fortepiano continuo cuts through clearly without obvious microphone spotlighting. The sound is effortlessly realistic, especially the SACD layer. ***JH***

Bach

Goldberg Variations

David Fray

★★★★☆

CD **Erato**

COMING IN AT around 87 minutes, David Fray's broad expansive account of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is both relaxed and leisurely, yet intellectually focused and rhythmically adroit. While contrapuntal lines are perhaps not brought out as deftly as (say) Glenn Gould's 1982 version, the part writing is always clearly articulated, and each new variation relates to the previous one in terms of tempi and overall feel. The piano, recorded in the warm acoustic of the Chapelle de Piétat, (a chapel in Fray's childhood home town) sounds clear, crisp and immediate, with excellent clarity and a full, rich tonality. ***JH***

Beirut

Artifacts

★★★★☆

CD **Pompeii Records**

OVER THE COURSE of a decade and a half, London-based Zach Condon has attracted an army of fans. If you're new to Beirut, this curated potted history is the perfect introduction, containing everything from feel-good hits like *Elephant Gun* and *My Family's Role In The World Revolution*. The result is joyous, horn-based folk bangers as well as deeper cuts that explore Condon's fascination with traditional Balkan music and grand baroque pop. Not flowing like a proper album, it nonetheless showcases Condon's talent admirably. Like a musical extrapolation of a Wes Anderson movie – quirky, colourful and fun. ***PH***

COOL COLLECTION

Singer and lyricist with pre-Britpop supremely stylish poseurs Suede, Brett Anderson nominates a trio of albums that have helped sculpt the musical vision behind classics *Dog Man Star*, *Coming Up* and beyond

Brian Eno

Ambient 1: Music For Airports

Polydor (1978)

The first of four albums released in Eno's Ambient series. "This was made right in the middle of the punk thing when everyone was trying to get more aggressive," says Brett, "and Brian Eno went away and not necessarily invented ambient music, but certainly popularised it. If I had to just listen to one song for the rest of my life it would be *1/1*... It does something very physical, very chemical to me."

Scott Walker

Scott 3

Philips (1969)

Walker's third solo album after quitting the Bros. "What I like about Scott Walker is it's millimetres away from easy listening, but is still not easy listening," says Brett. "There's the occasional little detail or bar he puts in that makes it not easy listening. He's one of the greatest singers ever. It's amazing to see how powerful a voice can be, I don't mean in a macho sense, but how if the voice is doing something fascinating how minimal the music can be."

Interpol

Turn On The Bright Lights

Matador (2002)

"It's almost as if Ian Curtis never hanged himself," is how Blender's review began. "*NYC* manages to be simultaneously dirge-like and uplifting," says Brett. "I love the lyrics in it: 'I tried on seven faces before I knew which one to wear'. For me the art of great songwriting is when you're fascinated by the words, but you don't know too much about what it's about... As a listener you should have to join the dots."

Picture credit: Rene Oonk/Shutterstock.com

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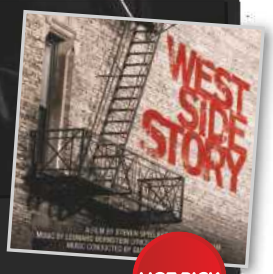


HOT PICK

Leonard Bernstein

West Side Story – film soundtrack

Los Angeles Philharmonic

Gustavo Dudamel

★★★★★

CD **Disney**

SPIELBERG'S FILM HAS been highly praised and makes a powerful impression. The music, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, is terrific; everything is sung and played with kick-ass defiance and attitude, as well as warmth and tenderness (where needed), plus genuine emotion. Despite the passing of 60+ years, *West Side Story* remains fresh, exciting and relevant – largely because Bernstein's wonderful music is so memorable and makes the characters and their situations totally

Despite the passing of 60+ years, *West Side Story* remains fresh, exciting and relevant

believable. Technically, the recording is very good. But while clear, refined and well balanced, it's rather over processed – some obvious bass EQ in places. No matter; musically the end result is still hugely impressive, enjoyable, and at times very moving. ***JH***

Goodbye June

See Where The Night Goes

★★★★★

CD **Earache Records**

ON THEIR THIRD album, the Deep South blues rockers offer a ray of Covid-busting sunshine and good times. "We hope this music lifts your spirits" they declare and with a group photo that evokes Billy Connelly and The Wombles they're off to a good start. *Baby I'm Back* begins with sound of a bottle beer being opened, then the swampy guitar cues up a vocal in the Axl Rose/Steven Tyler vein. Like much of the album, the song is super catchy. The title track whiffs delightfully of stadium hotdogs and is best listened to on someone else's shoulders. Try playing this set loud after sunset and just see where the night goes. ***PSH***

Edgar Moreau

Transmission

Luzerner Sinfonieorchester

Michael Sanderling

★★★★★

CD **Erato**

EACH OF THE five works on this CD has links to Jewish themes and culture. The centrepiece is Swiss composer Ernest Bloch's *Hebraic Rhapsody Schelomo*. Bloch is also represented by his *Three Pieces From Jewish Life*. We also have a cello concerto by Austrian Erich Wolfgang Korngold, plus Max Bruch's *Kol Nidrei* and Maurice Ravel's two Hebrew melodies. Moreau's cello playing is deep and soulful and he takes the music slowly to savour its spiritual depth and extract maximum feeling. The recording is rich and luxuriantly sonorous, with impressive warmth and depth, though some sniffs from the soloist can be heard. ***JH***

SASAMI

Squeeze

★★★★★

CD **Domino**

THIS ALBUM SHOULDN'T really work, but it does. And then some. Sasami Ashworth mixes all kinds of influences on this, her debut, and she ropes in some famous names to help: Megadeth's Dick Verbeuren drums on one track and a handful of songs are produced by Ty Sygall. When it comes to the record itself, there are sweeping, anthemic, Fleetwood Mac-esque power ballads as well as crunchy nu-metal blowouts like *Skin A Rat*. It's an intriguing mixture – schizophrenic some would say – but on tracks like fuzzy earworm *Make It Right* everything falls into place. ***PH***

Big Thief

Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe In You

★★★★★

CD **4AD**

THE US quartet returns with a sprawling double album of 20 songs, cut down from 45 recorded for the project and displaying not only the prolific nature of their distinctive songwriting, but its dazzling diversity. There's surging rock (*Little Things*), drum-machine pop (*Wake Me Up To Drive*), ramshackle folk (*Certainty*) and campfire singalongs (*Blue Lightning*) while *Spud Infinity* buzzes with the kind of warmth and wit associated with John Prine. All are sung with an open-hearted honesty shot through with a deep and intuitive sense of mystery and the effect is like finding four bands in one. ***NW***

Franz Schubert

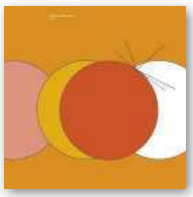
Symphony In E Major completed by Richard Dunser, Berner symphonieorchester Mario Venzago

★★★★★

CD **Propsero**

RICHARD DUNSER'S NEW completion of Schubert's unfinished Symphony D729 from 1821 is rather different to the 1979 release by Brian Newbould. Different material is used for the inner movements, as Dunser felt Schubert's second and third movements were: "annoyingly conventional". Perhaps; but the original slow movement is lovely and evokes the world of Rosamunde. Mario Venzago delivers a very good performance that's well worth hearing. The recording is crisp and detailed, with impressive separation and clarity. The wonderful overture to Fierabras is also included . ***JH***

Picture credits: Andrew Thomas Huang (SASAMI) and Maria Mochnacz (PJ Harvey)



Action & Tension & Space
Tellus

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Rune Grammofon**

IF YOU LIKE your tunes a little less obvious than the regular mainstream fare, Norway is the place to look. Here the vibe is very much spaced-out instrumental lounge-rock, with krautrock kicking things off via propulsive bass, mellotron, drums, Rhodes *etc*. It has distinct shades of Can, but keeps things fresh. The title track is more post rock with hints of Tortoise in the organ sound, but thereafter the influences are much less clear. What is obvious, however, is that the bass is an upright 'bull fiddle' over lap steel, keys and percussion. If you like your beats hypnotic this is a (space) world that's well worth exploring. ***JK***

Spiritualized
Everything Was Beautiful

★★★★☆

CD **Bella Union**

SWEEPING THROUGH THE dial of *EWB*, there's perfect pop, gospel, blues, Spector's Wall of Sound, the Beach Boys, heartbreaking country, acid rock and coruscating free jazz – often in the same song. All the Spiritualized ingredients are present and correct. Multiple listens peel back the layers of production. It's worth the admission alone for killer closing song *I'm Coming Home Again* – an Eddie Hazel-esque six-string freak out floating in an ocean of gospel bliss. Jason Pierce continues to orbit high above a planet of his own making and all lovers of ambitious music should take note, not just Spiritualized devotees. ***SB***

PJ Harvey
Hope Six Demolition Project – Demos

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **UMC/Island**

WRITTEN WHILE TRAVELLING across Kosovo, Afghanistan and Washington with photographer Seamus Murphy and recorded as part of an art installation open to the public, Harvey's ninth album became her first to debut at number one in 2016. Available now as a vinyl repress, this collection of unreleased demos is arguably of more interest to the Polly Jean completist. The stripped-back 11 tracks provide a better opportunity to appreciate the serious message at their core and the joyous experimentation that the band is rightly celebrated for. ***JDW***

Modern Studies
We Are Here

★★★★☆

CD **Fire Records**

MODERN STUDIES DESCRIBE themselves as: "poetic protagonists" and their music as a "smoky folk opus". In reality, it's a combination of the dense dream pop of *Do You Wanna* or lilting adult lullabies such as *Open Face* and *Wild Ocean*. Clear traces of Kate Bush, Dead Can Dance and Sandy Denny are all woven into the fabric of this quartet. Hushed vocals, swooping strings, piano tinkles that sound like they were recorded in an empty hall and the occasional *Doctor Who* sound effect will keep you on your toes. It might take a few listens, but there's much to enjoy here. ***PSH***

Mahler
Des Knaben Wunderhorn
Baborák ensemble
Radek Baborák

★★★★☆

CD **Animal Music**

A FASCINATING DISC that features chamber orchestra arrangements of nine out of 12 of the songs from *Des Knaben*, plus *Wunderhorn* symphonic movements including *Blumine*, *Urlicht* from the second and the finale of the fourth. The popular adagietto from the fifth is also included. The revised scoring is colourful, with some rich pungent sonorities that have been well captured by the engineers. Alas, three songs are missing, but no reason is given for their absence... The recording is excellent; detailed, crisp and forward, with impressive clarity and immediacy. ***JH***

STREAMING CHARTS

qobuz.com's top-10 most popular streaming albums

1 Bonobo
Fragments

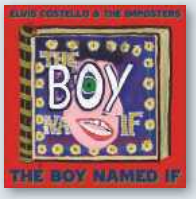
2 Cat Power
Covers

3 The Weeknd
Dawn FM

4 Fleetwood Mac
Rumours

5 Keb' Mo'
Good To Be...

6 Adele
30



7 Elvis Costello & The Imposters
The Boy Named If

8 Eric Clapton
The Lady In The Balcony: Lockdown Sessions (Live)

9 The Lumineers
Brightside

10 Louis Fine
Lofi Beats

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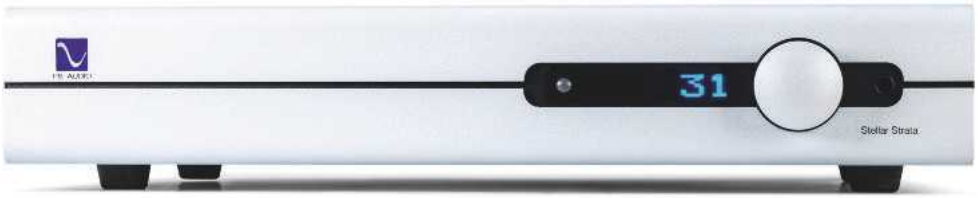

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JUST LIKE **HEAVEN**

From hairspray goth survivors to national treasures, ***Nigel Williamson*** charts the heady days and darkest nights of The Cure

Picture credit: Ben Houdijk/Shutterstock.com

The heady rush of what we have come to call post-punk launched a golden era of whip-smart, avant garde bands who took the raw energy and dogmatic simplicity of punk and transformed it into something more cerebral and arty. The late Seventies and early Eighties gave us the likes of Wire, PIL, Cabaret Voltaire, Pere Ubu, Gang Of Four and The Fall. Yet the most enduring and commercially successful of all those who fell under the post-punk banner has proved to be The Cure.

In *Rip It Up And Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-84*, Simon Reynolds argues post-punk is: "less a genre of music than a space of possibility" characterised by: "a set of open-ended imperatives: innovation; wilful oddness; the jettisoning of all things precedented".

Close to me

Robert Smith – The Cure's guitarist, lead vocalist, songwriter and only constant member over 40+ years – famously hates labels, but even he would find difficulty arguing with Reynolds' admirably freewheeling description.

Call Smith's band goth-rockers, however, and you are likely to be met with howls of outrage. "We're not categorisable," he insisted in 2005, following the release of the band's 12th studio album. "I suppose we were post-punk when we came out, but I just play Cure music – whatever that is".

And whatever 'Cure music' may be, it has always been a multi-faceted thing. When the band started they made a splash with angular but accessible three-minute songs such as *Boys Don't Cry*. But adding layers of keyboards and guitars, they swiftly developed a taste for epic arrangements coupled with lyrics about alienation and despair.

A romantically morbid image that involved dishevelled, fright-wig hair, sooty eyeliner and lipstick smeared like blood helped them earn a reputation as the godfathers of goth rock.

Smith hated and disowned the term, but in truth it wasn't hard to see where it came from. Gloom and doom stalked the songs on 1982's album *Pornography*, which included such bleak lyrics as: "It doesn't matter if we all die". *NME* described the album as: "Phil Spector in hell".

Some took the doom-laden sentiments inherent in the goth aesthetic rather too literally and at one of the band's concerts in Los Angeles in 1986 a fan attempted to stab himself to death. A little later two teenagers committed suicide while listening to The Cure. The band pinned a cutting of the story to the studio wall while recording *Disintegration*.

Yet alongside the darker tendencies Smith boasted a pure pop sensibility that by the late-Eighties had taken The Cure to the top of the charts, juxtaposing sweet sounds and mournful lyrics on albums of melancholic grandeur that contained highly infectious and connective pop hit singles such as *Just Like Heaven*, *Lullaby* and the summery, sun-kissed *Lovesong*.

The *Pornography* tour saw the start of the big hair, smudged make-up and dressing in black

Seldom has despair ever been clothed in songs so infectious and connective, an irresistible juxtaposition that led to The Cure winning the Brit Award for Best British Group in 1991. The following year came the high tide of The Cure's commercial success when the album *Wish* reached number one in the UK and number two in the US.

After that, the releases slowed to roughly an album every four years, but even that stopped after 2008's *4:13 Dream*, which at the time of writing remains the band's last studio album. Yet the Cure legend has continued to grow. In 2009 the group received *NME*'s God-Like Genius and the one-time goth outsiders have become such a part of the mainstream that their songs have been covered not only by fellow travellers such as Dinosaur Jr, The Smashing Pumpkins and The Wedding Present, but also by acts as diverse as Cowboy Junkies and Phoebe Bridgers.

Even Adele has done a version of *Lovesong* from 1989's *Disintegration*. After including it on her 30-million-selling album *21*, she explained that the first gig she ever attended was when her mother took her to see The Cure at London's Finsbury Park. "It's such a touching song and I recorded it in one take," she said. "I sang it for mum".

Although Smith has kept The Cure touring, fans have waited almost 14 years for the follow up to *4:13 Dream*. In 2019 he claimed to have recorded 19 new songs and promised the album wold be released before the year was out. He even announced a working title: *Live From The Moon*. Nothing appeared and two years later he claimed to have two new Cure albums awaiting release. "One of them's very, very doom and gloom and the other one isn't," he declared.

That nothing has materialised has prompted speculation that he's concerned that the songs didn't live up to the high bar set by the band's enviable back catalogue. "I'm measuring the songs up to *Pornography* and *Disintegration*," he admitted at one point. "I find myself thinking I've done this before, and better."

So the wait goes on and hopefully there may be an new album in the autumn 2022 when The Cure are due to embark on their first tour in three years.

Pictures of you

The band's origins lie in the drab suburbia of Crawley, once a quiet Sussex market town, but which sprawled outwards in ugly fashion in the Sixties due to the close proximity of Gatwick Airport and the arrival of cheap charter flights and overseas package holidays.

Together with school mates Mick Dempsey on bass and Laurence 'Lol' Tolhurst on drums, by 1976 Smith was playing gigs in local pubs under the name Easy Cure until, lured by a music press ad asking: "Wanna be a rock star?" the band entered a talent contest and won a contract with the Dutch label Hansa.

It proved an uneasy alliance and when the group recorded *Killing An Arab* as their debut single, the label refused to release it and asked them to record some covers instead. Rightly ▶

ALBUM BY ALBUM

1979

THREE IMAGINARY BOYS

A high-energy collection of primitively played but unusually tuneful three-minute songs straddling the boundaries of punk and pop. It didn't include the singles *Killing An Arab* and *Boys Don't Cry* – but there was a cover of Hendrix's *Foxy Lady*.

1980

SEVENTEEN SECONDS

A quantum leap from their debut and the start of the trademark 'doom and gloom' sound. Dark, atmospheric and strongly influenced by the two months Smith had spent doubling up as guitarist in Siouxsie And The Banshees. Standout track: *A Forest*.

1981

FAITH

Darker still, songs such as *All Cats Are Grey*, *The Funeral Party* and *The Drowning Man* sounded haunted and emotionally crushed. This is goth rock at its most chilling and crepuscular, whether Smith likes the term or not.

1982

PORNOGRAPHY

Misunderstood at the time, but since recognised as The Cure's first masterpiece. The sound is heavily layered with guitars and synths and the mood bleak and nihilistic, but with an epic grandeur. "Phil Spector in hell," as *NME* succinctly put it.

offended, Smith refused to play ball and their contract was swiftly terminated.

However, a demo of *Killing An Arab* caught the ear of Chris Parry, who had shepherded the early career of The Jam and who signed the band – now known simply as The Cure – to Fiction, a subsidiary of Polydor.

Released as a single at the back end of 1978, the song's inflammatory title prompted accusations of racism, causing the label to put a sticker on the record denying any such connotations. In fact, Smith's rant in the song was inspired by Albert Camus' novel *L'etranger* (*The Stranger*) in which the protagonist commits just such a crime and is sentenced to a public beheading. The song, Smith insisted, was simply about: "the value of a human life."

On its release *NME* referred to the band as: "a breath of fresh suburban air on the capital's smog-ridden pub-and-club circuit" and the art-punk of The Cure's 1979 debut LP *Three Ordinary Boys* was similarly well received, although Smith, who has often been his own harshest critic, subsequently denounced the album as: "superficial".

The Cure's music has been covered by everyone from Adele to Dinosaur Junior

Boys don't cry

With Simon Gallup replacing Dempsey on bass, the follow-up album, 1980's morose and atmospheric *Seventeen Seconds* began a sequence of increasingly bleak records as The Cure evolved into avatars of doom.

Songs such as *All Cats Are Grey* and *The Drowning Man* on the band's next album, 1981's *Faith* sounded haunted and emotionally crushed. 1982's *Pornography*, the third in what came to be known as the band's 'doom trilogy' was recorded under what Smith called: "a lot of mental stress", some of it narcotically enhanced. "I had two choices at the time, which were either completely giving in and committing suicide or making a record of it and getting it out of me," he said. Nihilism took over. "We sang, 'It doesn't matter if we all die' and that is exactly what we thought at the time," Gallup admitted. And yet the music with its relentless sonic attack was endlessly compelling and uncannily self-assured. Despite some poor reviews, the album made number eight in the UK charts and has in time come to be regarded as an all-time post-punk classic – "a masterpiece of claustrophobic self-loathing," *Uncut* called it on its reissue more than 20 years later.

The high tide of their commercial success came in 1992 when *Wish* reached number one

"It is weird looking back," Smith said many years later. "Where did that grotesque confidence come from? Probably punk. Most of the punk bands were awful. I thought we were all right and we were getting better."

Better and stranger with it, for it was on the tour to promote *Pornography* that the distinctive goth image of big hair, smudged make-up and dressing in existential black was first adopted.

Yet it was also a troubled time in The Cure's existence, with internal feuding exacerbated by the consumption of too many drugs. The Jam had recently split and The Clash had imploded and it seemed that The Cure was about to join them on the list of those lost in action, particularly when Smith absconded to join Siouxsie And The Banshees.

He had already acted as the Banshees' stand-in guitarist in 1980 when The Cure and Siouxsie toured together and the group's style had exerted a strong influence, which can be heard right through *Pornography*. This time, however, he decamped full-time and stayed for 18 months, keeping The Cure going as a side project with a series of what he called: "stupid pop singles" deliberately designed to subvert the goth image, such as the cheesy *Let's Go To Bed* and the surprisingly jaunty *The Love Cats*, which ironically became The Cure's first top-ten hit.

Fans were relieved when he returned to The Cure full time in mid-1984 and the resurrected band recorded the psych-influenced *The Top*

1984

THE TOP

After an 18-month stint with the Banshees, Smith came up with The Cure's most hallucinogenic and eclectic album. *Melody Maker*'s Steve Sutherland (whatever happened to him?) wrote at the time: "Psychedelia that can't be dated".

1985

THE HEAD ON THE DOOR

Combining doom and gloom with a brighter, pop sensibility, The Cure's sixth album marked a turning point. *In Between Days* could have been a New Order song and *Close To Me* tipped its hat to Motown. It almost sounded like they were having fun.

1987

KISS ME, KISS ME, KISS ME

A double album built on the more accessible side of Smith's songwriting included the romantic hit *Just Like Heaven*. Funk rhythms, horns and string sections, this was the sound of The Cure on the threshold of the mainstream.

1989

DISINTEGRATION

A return to The Cure's darker, gloomier aesthetic and a triumph, commercially and artistically, with *Lullaby*, *Lovesong*, *Pictures Of You* and *Fascination Street* giving the band a quartet of hit singles. Epic, mesmerising and utterly seductive.

1992

WISH

Jangling guitars make for an accessible sound befitting The Cure's new-found status as alt-rock stadium headliners. Yet just beneath the surface of even the brightest of the album's songs the existential angst is as powerful as ever.

(1984), probably the most hallucinogenic, eclectic, inconsistent and chaotic album in the band's catalogue.

The following year the band's line-up underwent one of its periodic major overhauls. Gallup, whose departure after *Pornography* had further fuelled the break-up rumours, rejoined and Porl Thompson, an old friend from Easy Cure days, came in on guitar, keyboards and saxophone. The new line-up produced *The Head On The Door* (1985), a hybrid album which combined the doom and gloom of yore with a brighter, almost upbeat pop sensibility. One track, *Close To Me* even sounded like a Motown pastiche.

They followed with the double album *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* (1987) built on the more accessible side of Smith's songwriting and which included the wistfully romantic hit single *Just Like Heaven*, inspired by a trip to the Sussex sea shore with his future wife Mary Poole.

Fascination street

"The music's always reflected, to a very large degree, how I am mentally," Smith said. He sounded contented and two years later the couple left the metropolis to settle in a Sussex village. "I survived," Smith noted. "A lot of people that I left in London didn't."

The move coincided with the wonderfully atmospheric 1989 album *Disintegration*, a work of brooding, epic grandeur, which brought together all of the different strands in The Cure's aesthetic – heart-ripping despair, psychedelics and joyous love songs.

Astonishingly, the band's American record company was unimpressed and were reluctant to release it, telling Smith it was: "wilfully obscure". In the end the album spawned four hit singles (*Lullaby*, *Lovesong*, *Pictures Of You* and *Fascination Street*) and sold three-million copies. Suddenly The Cure were improbable stadium rock heroes and the Prayer tour that followed included some of band's finest performances, captured on the live album *Entreat*. "It was never our intention to become

Smith remains the one constant of the band's 40+ year lifespan

Smith boasted a pop sensibility that by the Eighties took The Cure to the top of the charts

as big as this," Smith noted with a mixture of pleasure and horror.

It meant that another three years elapsed before the follow up *Wish* finally appeared in 1992. Multi-faceted and heavily guitar-driven, the album performed well, shifting another three-million copies and yielding the hit singles *High* and *Friday I'm In Love*.

There were further internal upheavals as Thompson left to join Page and Plant and Tolhurst, who had been ousted from the band in 1989, unsuccessfully sued over the right to The Cure's name. As a result the release of the next album was delayed until 1996 when the disappointing *Wild Mood Swings* marked the end of the band's commercial peak.

Smith's response to the declining interest was to promote 2000's *Bloodlfowers* as the third part of a trilogy that had begun 18 years earlier with *Pornography* and continued with *Disintegration*. Although the record revived many of The Cure's favourite trademarks, Smith's claim that the three albums were: "inextricably linked" was something of a stretch, but the Trilogy Concerts, in which all three albums were played in their entirety one after the other made for a magnificent DVD.

Disintegration

A move to Geffen Records produced their 12th studio album, *The Cure*, in 2004, followed four years later by *4:13 Dream*. Neither of them were bad albums and had much to commend them, but perhaps inevitably highlighted the inevitable difficulty of sounding original after toiling so long at the rockface "You write a certain number of songs and, honestly, you repeat yourself," Smith admitted. "How many things are there to write about? Seven stories or something?"

Since then The Cure have covered *Hello Goodbye* on a McCartney tribute album with guest vocals from Paul's son, James, while David Bowie guitarist Reeves Gabrels joined the line-up. Smith curated the 2018 Meltdown Festival, which allowed him to give a platform to some of his favourite bands, including Nine Inch Nails, Psychedelic Furs and My Bloody Valentine. The Cure played a handful of 40th anniversary shows, headlined at Glastonbury and were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, with no fewer than 10 members past and present on stage together.

Whether The Cure ever release another album or not, their legacy is a unique body of work that has bridged doom-like goth tendencies and a giddy pop sensibility to create luscious dark-rock symphonies full of both melodrama and melody.

The band has survived personal traumas, fights, fall outs, numerous line-up changes, a bitter court case, alcoholism and substance abuse with their emotional honesty and integrity intact. "One of the lovely things about The Cure is that we're still considered to be a slightly weird and outsider kind of band," Smith said in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview. More than 40 years on, there has still never been anyone else quite like them ●

Picture credits: ToskanalNC/Shutterstock.com (left)

1996

WILD MOOD SWINGS

An apt title for a collection of songs that range from the perfect pop of *Mint Car* to the dirge-like *Want*. Strings, acoustic guitars and neo-psychedelia extend the sonic palette, although the album marked the end of the band's commercial peak.

2000

BLOODFLOWERS

Part three of a trilogy that began with *Pornography* and continued through *Disintegration*, according to Smith. It was a neat marketing ploy, but in the way *Bloodflowers* brought together The Cure's favourite trademarks you could just about hear what he meant.

2004

THE CURE

Co-producer Ross Robinson (Limp Bizkit/Slipknot) brings a heavier sound without ever quite descending into nu-metal. One critic suggested The Cure had begun to sound like a tribute band to themselves – but how do you sound fresh and innovative after a dozen albums?

2008

4:13 DREAM

Whether this will be the last ever Cure studio album remains to be seen. The themes are well trodden – "I don't want to bring you down about my suicide," Smith sings on the epic *The Reasons Why* – and the satisfaction lies in the familiarity.

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True Colours Industries
Emerald Constrictor 6-way powerblock

APART FROM ALLOWING connection of up to six pieces of equipment, TCI's powerblock includes the company's Emerald Constrictor RFI filtering mains cable, which features eight cores of silver-plated copper conductors insulated in PTFE and is designed to act as a filter to eliminate unwanted mains-borne interference.

The wires are braided in a non-inductive and self-screening construction and finished in a polyolefin braid to provide abrasion resistance. The distribution block itself has a master on/off switch and is fitted with six UK mains sockets. The other end features a 13A UK True-Plug. A version of the powerblock with Schuko connectors is also available.

Connecting my audio equipment to the Emerald Constrictor, I am able to compare it with a standard six-way mains distribution block. The sockets are moulded from a single top cover of the block, as with many mains distribution blocks. Contrary to what I would expect at this price point, there is no internal surge protection or mains conditioning; instead, the unit relies solely on the filtering abilities of the Emerald Constrictor cable.

Out of this world

There's no doubt about it, using the Emerald Constrictor provides some subtle improvements in terms of clarity compared with a standard six-way mains block. This is most apparent when playing a recording of Jupiter from Holtz's *The Planets Suite* performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra with the energetic twinkling of the violins in the opening section, which pleasingly contrast with the louder rousing sections that follow. The quiet transition into the music of the stately section – which of course was adopted for the hymn *I Vow to Thee, My Country* – seems much clearer and I can sense more of the detail in the flutes in particular.

The Emerald Constrictor powerblock is an admirable upgrade from a standard six-way mains distribution option and the snazzy mains cable has the bonus of looking great. A simple, but worthwhile upgrade. ***NR***

DETAILS

PRICE
£215 fitted with a 1.5m cable

TELEPHONE
07710 196949

WEBSITE
tcicables.com

OUR VERDICT
★★★★½

Nordost
Blue Heaven LS analog interconnect

HAILING FROM NORDOST'S entry-level Leif family of cables, the Blue Heaven range includes everything from RCAs, to tonearm, Ethernet and USBs. All the Leif cables are constructed using silver-plated, OFC solid core conductors that have undergone the company's proprietary FEP extrusion process. This individually encloses each conductor in FEP insulation to reduce the dielectric properties by increasing the signal speeds to improve accuracy of the signal transfer. This is further improved by mechanically tuning the conductors through the adjustment of their dimensions and spacing.

The cable has a translucent blue sheath and is terminated at each end with gold-plated RCA connectors. It is directional and this is indicated by arrows printed on the heatshrink at one end. The cable is quite flexible and I have no difficulty fitting it to the back of my equipment between my valve preamp and monoblock amps.

Samba in blue

I kick off with a Sixties LP of Tony Mottola playing some classic Latin music. This is an excellent recording and Mottola's version of *Summer Samba* comes across clearly and effortlessly. The flute solo is bright and the percussion fresh and open. The crystal-clear top end is a real testament to the silver-plating on the OFC conductors. Of particular merit is the impeccably balanced interplay between guitar and wind instruments, while the tonal detail of each instrument is perfect.

With Schumann's *Piano Concerto in A minor*, the reproduction of the piano is spot on and bass response is powerful, extended and tight.

Vivaldi's *Concerto No.2* performed by I Musici brilliantly conveys the blackness of the silences between sections, as well as the excellent dynamic range. The detail is all there and the harpsichord in the background is very clear.

This interconnect offers superb detail, a full soundstage and really refined performances. ***NR***

DETAILS

PRICE
£370 for a 1m pair

TELEPHONE
0131 5553922

WEBSITE
nordost.com

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

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Buying **Guide**

Selecting the components you want to audition is never easy, but help is at hand with our pick of the best to pass through our respected reviewing process

Hi-Fi Choice Recommends
ESSENTIAL HI-FI YOU'LL WANT TO OWN

■ **CD players** p112 ■ **Amplifiers** p113 ■ **Pre/power amps** p113
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CD PLAYERS

Audiolab
6000CDT

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
AXC35

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.

★★★★★

Exposure
XM CD

PRICE: £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

A highly likeable half-width compact disc player that presents music in an enjoyable yet technically accurate manner, the XM CD might lack the operational slickness and versatility of some rivals, but it more than makes up for it with its energetic, lively sound, dynamic light and shade and charming character.

★★★★½

Métronome Technologie
Le Player 2S

PRICE: £5,100 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

As good as the sweet treble and rich bass are, what really impresses here is how when fed weaker CDs and impoverished MP3s the delivery remains unflappable and composed as layers of detail are locked into sharp focus.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity
M3scd

PRICE: £1,150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Able to string together elements of the mix dextrously for a natural and believable sound, the M3scd's combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity are highly impressive while its excellent timing and tonal balance leave you wanting more. With its lovely, lyrical sonics oozing detail and subtlety, this is an extremely capable player.

★★★★★

Rotel
CD11 Tribute

PRICE: £400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

A stunning team up between Marantz legend Ken Ishiwata before his sad passing and hi-fi luminary Karl-Heinz Fink, this is not one of those do-it-all players. Instead, its simple, refined sound and no-nonsense operation combine for a stunningly frill-free approach to superb playback at a great price.

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER

Audiolab
8300CDQ
£1,100 *HFC* 448
Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.

★★★★★

Leema Acoustics
Stream IV
£2,300 *HFC* 456
The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.

★★★★½

Marantz
SACD 30n
£2,700 *HFC* 468
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★

Roksan
K3 CD Di
£1,300 *HFC* 403
Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.

★★★★★

AMPLIFIERS

Copland
CSA150

PRICE: £4,988 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

A tube/transistor hybrid that's more than the sum of its parts, the CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder as it also excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at the price considering all that it does.

★★★★★

Cyrus Audio
i7-XR

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Cyrus' engineers have been let off the leash budget-wise and the result is very impressive because while this is still unquestionably a Cyrus integrated amp – it looks like one, feels like one and has all the features we'd expect from the company – everything is ramped up and sounds better than ever before.

★★★★★

Exposure
3510

PRICE: From £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Delivering speaker control like a sergeant major on a power trip, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 3510 has been transported from the Eighties – all minimalist design and line-level inputs. Additional USB/DSD64 DAC and MC or MM phono boards are available and the performance comes across like a sizable blast from the past.

★★★★★

Quad
Vena II

PRICE: From £650 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 448

With a comprehensive spec that moves Quad's most compact integrated on and enough weight to bring any type of music so thrillingly to life, the Vena II does a fine job of giving bass natural weight, snap and dynamic ability while delivering a big room-filling sound that belies those tiny dimensions.

★★★★★

Rega
io

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

It might appear small and rather plain and it might not be over flowing with features or boast a huge amount of Watts, but give the io a talented source and you can't fail to be impressed by its outrageous musicality and lightness of foot. It's at one with the music with a supple fluency and rhythmical literacy.

★★★★★

Yamaha
A-S3200

PRICE: £5,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 464

This highly accomplished performer succeeds through its breadth of ability rather than exceeding in one specific area. A highly capable performer, its snappy sound and gutsy demeanour combine with speed, grip versatility and power to create a great-looking beast of an integrated.

★★★★★

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

Cambridge Audio
Edge W
£2,500 *HFC* 447
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.

★★★★★

Longdog Audio
P6100M
£3,500 *HFC* 469
They may look and feel old-fashioned, but the P6100Ms are one of those rare but happy hi-fi surprises: seriously high-end sound for mid-price money. More transparent than they have any right to be, they have a fluid and mellifluous midband and pack one hell of a punch.

★★★★★

Exposure
XM7/XM9
£1,240/£1,390 *HFC* 429
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.

★★★★★

Rotel
Michi P5/S5
£3,300/£5,400 *HFC* 467
Rotel's high-end sub-brand might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its lack of detail. But that misses the point: when it comes to weight, scale and a breath-takingly natural approach to making music, few combos come even close to this one.

★★★★★

CABLES – INTERCONNECTS

NEW ENTRY

Atlas Cables
Element Achromatic

PRICE: £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Minuet

PRICE: £160 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Replacing the Prelude, this RCA interconnect is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire to improve clarity and high-frequency performance. The result is remarkably sophisticated for the money with detail, positioning of instruments, imaging and separation absolutely nailed on.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

Chord Company
Clearway

PRICE: £100 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

A fantastic performer across a broad range of different music styles, the Clearway features the company's proprietary ARAY conductor geometry and ensures that all the detail of the individual instruments remains well defined, throughout playback – adding to the overall realism of the production.

★★★★★

Ecosse Cables
Master Reference SE

PRICE: £425 for 0.8m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Designed to convey an even greater degree of transparency, detail and three dimensionality than its rival interconnects, the Master Reference SE certainly doesn't disappoint. Punchy basslines, well-defined positioning, supreme soundstage width and clear focus are very much the order of the day here.

★★★★★

Kimber Kable
Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★½

NEW ENTRY

QED
Performance Audio 40i

PRICE: £55 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

The stand-out winner of our interconnect *Group Test*, this black pearl-sheathed offering pairs a supreme sonic showing with impressive build quality and performances free from muddiness at a very generous price.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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CABLES – MAINS POWER

Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Stream

PRICE: £450 for 1.7m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.

★★★★½

Chord Company
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.

★★★★★

Furutech
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.

★★★★★

IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noiceable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary YellO

PRICE: £65 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 423

First introduced in the nineties, the YellO benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.

★★★★★

DragonFly Cobalt

DAC + Preamp + Headphone Amp

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

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NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS

Auralic
Altair G2.1

PRICE: £4,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Not just a network-attached DAC/preamp, with the addition of onboard storage the Altair G2.1 morphs into a self-contained music hub that reveals itself to be a deliciously neutral and clean source. It presents high levels of detail without sounding mechanical or artificial and musical involvement is top notch across all genres.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
Edge NQ

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Element X

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Supporting everything from network streaming to 768kHz PCM, DSD1024, MQA and Roon, the Element X can also comfortably drive a variety of headphones. Tardis like it hides a multitude of features in its svelte shell and operationally it proves pretty much impossible to throw off course. Be warned, it goes seriously loud.

★★★★★

NAD
M33

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.

★★★★★

Naim
ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★½

Yamaha
WXAD-10

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 442

One of the smallest options around, this MusicCast network audio player might not look like much, but don't be fooled – it has it where it counts. Tonal balance is neutral; bass is well integrated with good detail; and the space and three dimensionality add to the realism, making it great value for money.

★★★★½

MUSIC SERVERS

Bluesound
Vault 2i
£1,100 ***HFC* 452**
If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.

★★★★½

Innuos
Zenith Mk3
From £3,000 ***HFC* 451**
With one of the best interfaces going and a potently flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.

★★★★½

Melco
N100 EX
£2,000 ***HFC* 462**
Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Core
£1,900 ***HFC* 438**
Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.

★★★★★

DACS

Alpha Design Labs
Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.

★★★★★

Audiolab
M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
TT2

PRICE: £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
Zen DAC V2

PRICE: £160 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

Supporting PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256, this converter – that doubles as a headphone amp – is an absurdly talented option for the money. Connected to a digital source capable of delivering a lossless signal or better, it is consistently capable of an outstanding audio performance.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Mini-i Pro 3

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Claiming the spoils in *HFC* 482's DAC *Group Test*, the Mini-i Pro 3 offers a winning combination of comprehensive spec and features, a stunning casework and – regardless of which way you elect to employ its services – it sounds absolutely superb. In short, it's the most accomplished digital front end for under a grand.

★★★★★

PS Audio
DirectStream

PRICE: £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★

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IsoTek
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★★★★★

IsoTek
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC SCM40

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

One of the company's more compact designs, this 40-litre three-way floorstander is a sealed box cabinet with lower sensitivity than most (necessitating a pretty muscular amp to hear it at its best). However, this is a solid, robust, powerful and gutsy-sounding speaker with plenty of insight and expansive soundstaging. Subtle and delicate enough for softer moments, it's equally comfortable going loud – displaying dramatically rendered crescendos and a fine sense of space.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature

PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★½

DALI Spektor 6

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 473

This *Group Test* winner positions itself at an extremely competitive price point and while it looks like a £500 loudspeaker, it sounds like it costs way more. It has a lovely natural tone, plus lots of detail and great dynamics. It sounds big, confident and expansive and yet is never overbearing or in anyway in your face. Throw into the mix a devastating combination of finesse and musicality and it's insatiable appetite for rhythm, and it's a no-brainer at the price.

★★★★★

Kerr Acoustic K320 mk.3

PRICE: £7,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

This *Group Test* winning floorstander comprehensively trounced everything else in almost every way in its roundup. It boasts a tonality that's a touch on the warm side of dry alongside a soundstage of architectural precision. In other respects it has extended yet propulsive bass, a joyously open midband and a deliciously lustrous treble. Plus it makes music great fun.

★★★★★

Monitor Audio Gold 300

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 453

The benefits the Gold 300 brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure is very special. Although with vividly produced material it can verge on the 'hyper real', this is a consummate crowd pleaser that more than any rival at the price sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing.

★★★★★

Spendor D7.2

PRICE: £4,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Chord Company
Epic XL
£600 1.5m, terminated *HFC* 450
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Odyssey X
£150 1m, terminated *HFC* 451
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (*HFC* 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.

★★★★★

QED
XT25
£85 3m *HFC* 434
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★

True Colours Industries
Storm
£22 1m *HFC* 453
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
607 S2 Anniversary

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 470

More than just a range refresh, this baby box has had new life breathed into it in a rather skilful and expert way. So much more than the sum of its parts, the 607 S2 Anniversary Edition is highly engaging across all types of music, has a super classy treble and is the best B&W entry-level standmount yet.

★★★★★

Falcon Acoustics
RAM Studio 20

PRICE: From £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

The RAM Studio 20 clearly favours amps with plenty of grip, especially in the bass. It might not offer forensic levels of detail with which to dissect a recording, but as a wide-bandwidth, high-performance standmount that sounds easy, natural and is dripping with musical finesse, it takes some beating.

★★★★★

Fyne Audio
F1-8

PRICE: £6,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

If the F1-8 is anything to go by, size really does matter. If you're short of space, look elsewhere as this is a beast that won't melt into the background. But as a speaker that merges the strengths of the best standmounts and floorstanders, it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Concept 300

PRICE: £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 448

With unexpectedly large amounts of midband detail, a bouncy bottom end and enjoyable musicality, the Concept 300 conjures up a charming sound that puts the accent on civility and smoothness, but never at the expense of musical enjoyment – making it excellent value for money at the price.

★★★★★

Sonus faber
Lumina I

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

A worthy entry point into the Sonus faber family and a genuine star in its own right, the Lumina I manages to sound bigger, more self-assured and room filling than you'd expect from looking at it. It does all this while still delivering on the virtues expected from the company and looking and feeling very pleasant at the same time.

★★★★★

Spendor
Classic 3/1

PRICE: £2,730 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

The Spendor Classic may not be as modern looking as some rivals at the price, but don't be fooled: that traditional design hides a superbly talented standmount able to produce a sensational blend of accuracy, scale, refinement and sheer unadulterated fun, and it's not too fussy about placement.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

Atacama Audio
Apollo Cyclone 6
£100 ***HFC* 455**
Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Racks
X50
From £180.48 ***HFC* 453**
Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

★★★★★

IsoAcoustics
GAIA II
£300 ***HFC* 427**
Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

★★★★★

Townshend Audio
Seismic Isolation Podium
From £1,400 ***HFC* 426**
Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.

★★★★★

WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

Bluesound
Pulse Flex 2i

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

With no shortage of lower frequencies, the Pulse Flex 2i's bass extension is controlled, pleasantly quick and has an impressive level of clout to it. Used as a pair, the soundstage is large and effortless underpinned by the aforementioned bass while the connections and range of features provide impressive flexibility.

★★★★½

Devialet
Phantom Reactor 900

PRICE: £2,580 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Unlike any other wireless designs, the distinctive Phantom boasts 900W of peak power via its hybrid Class A/D amp and bass that dives down to a barely believable 18Hz. The result is power and extension that defies physics, but more impressive still is how it performs at low volume levels.

★★★★½

KEF
LS50 Wireless II

PRICE: £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, the LS50 Wireless II might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★½

KEF
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

It might not offer the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

★★★★★

Naim
Mu-so 2nd Generation

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

A world away from the traditional components Naim is known for, the Mu-so 2nd Generation delivers unfailingly entertaining sonics with hi-fi values and an exceptional musicality.
The best one-box speaker system full stop.

★★★★★

System Audio
Legend 5.2 Silverback

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

A new paradigm that shatters the notion that you need a strapping floorstander for deep, powerful bass, the Legend 5.2 Silverback musters a performance that is as coherent, palpable, tonally true and rhythmically compelling as the very best available rival at many multiples of its price.

★★★★★

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

Cambridge Audio
Evo 150
£2,250 *HFC* 477
In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★

NAD
M10
£2,200 *HFC* 451
With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Star
£3,500 *HFC* 433
Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

★★★★★

Novafidelity
X14
£690 *HFC* 446
Deserving of praise for the functionality it manages to squeeze into such a compact and elegant chassis, the X14's well thought out and practical approach will attract those looking to take their first steps into network audio and it makes a greater second-room setup.

★★★★½

TURNTABLES

AnalogueWorks
TT Zero

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Pristine without being bright, the TT Zero has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops precisely where it should. It is able to unpick all the audio strands with ease, sounding, open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and impressively clean, controlled and tuneful bass.

★★★★★

AVID
Volvere SP

PRICE: From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★

Linn
Majik LP12/Krane

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

For such an old design, this *Group Test* winner sounds surprisingly modern. It's not as soft and rounded as it used to be, but still retains enough of the traditional Sondek character for it to charm listeners. The result is a big, confident and enjoyable sound that's tonally a little warm but with high levels of technical virtuosity.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Debut Carbon EVO

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

Easy to setup and unfussy in use, the Debut Carbon EVO's extremely well-balanced sonic performance is comfortably the equal of any price rival, while the spaciousness of its soundstage and the unblemished nature of its performance make this one of the best sub-£500 turntable offerings period.

★★★★★

Rega
Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.

★★★★★

Technics
SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.

★★★★★

CARTRIDGES

Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN
£300 ***HFC* 452**
This *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.

★★★★★

Hana
Umami Red
£3,400 ***HFC* 483**
Translating from Japanese as 'brilliant" and 'gorgeous', this *Group Test*-winning low-output moving-coil cart more than lives up to its name. It sounds beautiful with a superb combination of power, poise, musicality, detail and insight, and makes music sound utterly magical.

★★★★★

Michell
Cusis S
£1,275 ***HFC* 479**
With a wonderfully refined but potent performance, this *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cartridge has user-friendly dimensions and stunning bass. The result is that it is deftly able to deliver a superb performance with a variety of different musical styles and setups.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

MoFi
UltraGold
£1,500 ***HFC* 485**
This good-looking medium-output moving-coil cartridge from the US record label retains the warmth and air we've come to expect of MC offerings, but partners it with the sort of impressive trackability you'll struggle to match at the price. A real smooth operator.

★★★★★

PHONO STAGES

Chord Electronics
Huei

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ropier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.

★★★★★

Hegel
V10

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
Zen Phono

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE: £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★

Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Audeze
LCDi3
£900 *HFC* 478
Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and an utterly compelling sense of dynamic freedom on this stunning *Group Test*-winning planar magnetic in-ear. With great poise and even handedness, it never gives the impression of trying too hard.

★★★★★

Oriveti
OH500
£500 *HFC* 451
Combining an airiness with low-end extension that most rivals can only dream of, the OH500's stylish resin enclosures house four Knowles balanced armatures (two for bass and two for the midrange) with an 8mm dynamic bass driver for an enjoyably vivid performance.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
IE 900
£1,100 *HFC* 478
If dynamic dexterity and resolution that would shame a spy satellite are what you crave, the IE 900 scours the noise floor like few other in-ear offerings at the price. Articulation, separation and drive are equally impressive while treble extension and refinement are superb.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PI7
£349 *HFC* 478
The first pair of True wireless in-ears from B&W does a supreme job of capturing fine details and stitching them into a wider whole. Bass extension is deep without being at the expense of speed and noise cancelling works without effecting the tonal balance.

★★★★★

HEADPHONES

Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PX7

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

Although it's no match for a high-end wired design, the noise-cancelling abilities of this wireless closed-back model are ideal for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're serious about enjoying your music out and about.

★★★★★

Dan Clark Audio
Aeon 2 Closed

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 462

Available as both open (warmer, fuller tone) and closed options (leaner midrange), the Aeon 2 is a timely update of the Aeon Flow that was so popular back in *HFC* 435. Its improved planar drivers feature increased damping and conjure up pinpoint detailing, thundering lower frequencies and a deft touch with subtle effects.

★★★★★

Rosson Audio Design
RAD-0

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

A largely viceless implementation of planar magnetic headphone that delivers the commendable virtues of the design with very few of the downsides. Comfortable and well made, the RAD-0 sounds absolutely superb.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
Momentum 3

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

With a Bluetooth performance that makes it hard to believe this is really a wireless offering, the Momentum might just be the most consistently entertaining performer Sennheiser has ever produced. Excellent design, fabulous features, subsonic bass and impeccable noise cancelling complete the package.

★★★★★

T+A
Solitaire P-SE

PRICE: £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

Shaving as much as 40 percent off the price of its flagship P headphone, while retaining more than 60 percent of the capability, this is a stunning open-back, planar magnetic T+A offering. It might be expensive, but the sheer levels of performance and the quality of the build and design mean it is one of the best.

★★★★★

PORTABLE DACS

AudioQuest
DragonFly Cobalt
£270 *HFC* 463
With a relatively low 24-bit/96kHz sample rate, expectations for the Cobalt aren't high until realising it means there's no need for USB driver software. Native MQA decoding is also supported and the open and richly detailed sound make this the best DragonFly offering yet.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Hugo 2
£1,800 *HFC* 428
An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Mojo
£400 *HFC* 423
It might be small and have no gain setting adjustment, but the Mojo takes some beating. Its scrupulous accuracy presents what is contained in a recording with no embellishment so that fine detail is extracted with ease, treble energy impresses and stridency remains absent.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
xDSD
£400 *HFC* 439
Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free – simply submit your ad with no more than **50 words** (we reserve the right to edit it if not), remembering to include your email, phone number and county. Simply email your ad to: **letters@hifichoice.co.uk**. This service is open to private advertisers only. Just **one** ad per household and please note that images are for illustration only and **do not** represent what is for sale.

FOR SALE

ICON AUDIO SMFV3 speakers. Unmarked. £850. Pro-Ject Xperience Classic turntable olive wood, new lid, GoldNote cart £795. Tisbury Audio Domino phono amp. Barely used £130. Denon DL103 cart, never used £255. All manuals boxed and excellent condition: **07771 807042 or email: vincehumphreys@hotmail.co.uk (Lancashire).**

LEAK Stereo 20 power/preamp, dark grey, £600: **07988 081094.**

QUAD II classic integrated valve amplifier. Gold finish, excellent condition with leads and instructions, can demo, £1,900: **07704 145987 (am only) or email: norbertstefan@yahoo.co.uk (Bedfordshire).**

AUDIO-TECHNICA ATH-70 electret condenser headphones. Vintage pair of headphones in good condition and with original packaging, £45: **email: petersharples20@gmail.com.**

LINN Sondek LP12 with Ittok LV11 tonearm and K9 cartridge: £1,500. Pair Linn Keilidh speakers: £200. Creek 5050 amplifier: £100. Mint condition: **07754 084481 or email: helen.a.marshall24@gmail.com (Guildford).**

SENNHEISER HD 800 headphones for sale. Mint condition for £600: **01656 733354.**

REGA P3 £195, Goldring Eroica moving-coil £99. Both little use/very good condition. Lyra Delos moving-coil cart, old but good/careful use £99. LSA1 standmounts, slight cosmetic damage to one, but sound great £175. Buyer to collect: **0790 5501265 or email: john.harris61@btinternet.com (East Sussex).**

ICON AUDIO MB845 Mk.1 monoblock amplifiers. Upgraded to SE version with new Mundorf capacitors. New 845 valves on one amp. Boxed. Great powerful sound. Sensible offers: **07717 752288 or email: captain_b99@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

NAKAMICHI CR2E cassette deck £150, Pioneer PL112D turntable £125, Russ Andrews Yello Powercord 30th Anniversary 1m in length, brand new £49. A5 *HiFi Choice* magazines from 1975 to 1987. 15 in total, £10 Each. Cash on collection only: **07708 431963 (Crewe, Cheshire).**

QUAD Artera Solus just back from Quad with full software upgrade. Mint condition, black, boxed £795: **0208 6949350 or email: alan-charlesworth@sky.com (London).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A370 power amplifier, Class A, 185W, fully functional with exception of bulb in on/off switch. Cosmetically very good with no scratches or dents. One owner. £1,000 ono: **01789 842336 (South Warwickshire).**

REGA Planer 3 turntable, white, excellent condition. Fitted with Ortofon Blue MM cartridge £420. Rega Fono MM phono stage. Excellent condition £80. Onkyo T4030 FM/DAB tuner and remote. Hardly used £60. All items with boxes: **01280 469852 or email: davidsangster53@gmail.com (Buckingham).**

THORENS TD 321 turntable with Linn Basik LV X and Nagaoka MP100. Little used for many years. Offers please to: **07463 572804 (Leics).**

QUAD ESL 988 speakers, black, immaculate condition, with original packaging, boxes, leads and owners manual. Full Quad service history – with all genuine Quad invoices. Recently tuned with the Nordost tuning disc. Can deliver, £1,250 ono: **01827 284023, mobile: 07855 579797.**

NAIM 72 preamp includes sets of spare circuit boards. A fine example of this popular model, £275: **01825 722936 or email: stewartandjoy@gmail.com.**

NORDOST Blue Heaven AC UK mains lead, 1.5m, as new boxed £120. SliC Eclipse C MK111 XLR interconnect 1m as new boxed £170. 2x Naim PowerLine Lite mains leads as new £20. iFI AC iPurifier UK version as new boxed £50 **email: stevecousins136@gmail.com (Dorset).**

SONUS FABER Sonetto speaker stands, in excellent condition, all original packaging, collection. £250 ono: **07398 642586 or email: johnakeanelangley@gmail.com (Windsor).**

REGA Planar 3 (black, Eighties) with RB300 and AT-OC5 £295 with cartridge, otherwise £245. Rare Sawafuji SFI-10 three-way pair, walnut £345. Audiolab 8000SX (black, Eighties) £195: **email: sn.banks@ntlworld.com (Hitchin).**

AUDIO RESEARCH LS28 preamplifier, mint condition with box and manual, buyer to collect £3,950: **07913 236601 (Manningtree, Essex).**

PROAC Tablette Reference 8 Signature black speakers, little used: £595. Musical Fidelity M6 Dac mint condition £550: **01704 628968 or 07968 769595.**

SBOOSTER BOTW MK11 audiophile power supply 15/16v. Excellent condition, with selection of interchangeable DC tips, manual and original box. Suitable for Chord TT2 or Upscaler £150:

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

07923047638 or email: dave.drew@talktalk.net (East Yorkshire).

PIONEER PL112D turntable £125. Nakamichi CR2E cassette deck (upgraded) £150. Russ Andrews Yello Powercord 30th Anniversary 1m UK to IEC female, never used £49. 15 A5 Size *Hi-Fi Choice* magazines from 1975 to 1987 £10 each. Cash on collection: **07708 431963.**

AUDIOLAB 8000A amplifier in original packaging and delivery by DPD (for £20 extra) £240 ono: **01299 270810 or email: as.parker@btinternet.com (South Shropshire).**

NEAT Iota Alpha speakers in Ebony Macassar finish. Light use. As new condition in original boxes/inserts: £950 ono. Cyrus CDi CD player, hardly used, as new condition in original box/inserts £850 ono: **07951 738222 or email: Jbrogden1@gmail.com (Surrey).**

THORENS TD124 MkII turntable, chassis only: £750. Linn Basik IVX tonearm: £130: **07988 081094**.

MYRYAD MXT 2000 FM tuner for sale, excellent, mint condition, brushed silver, finish, super FM reception. £400 ono: **01483 472650 (Woking, Surrey).**

AUDIOLAB 8000 CD player, totally mint condition, remote control, power lead and instructions. Can demo. £175. Collection or your courier: **07852 61550 or email: derek.03.forshaw@gmail.com (Wigan, Lancs).**

WORLD DESIGNS KT88 XL power amp, Phono 3S phono stage, HD3S XL headphone amp, Pre4 XL valve preamp, PSU3 power supply. All in as-new condition and excellent working order. Very little use. £3,500: **01159 754070 or 07531 288156.**

NAIM Nac 202 in immaculate, clean, working condition all fittings and bits supplied with original box (2012) – so no bleed on logo. Also NAPSC 2 brand new in box never opened. £1,150.00. Selling due to upgrade: **07850 759256 or email: julian@showex.plus.com (Bedfordshire).**

NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE Hyperspace turntable, 10in Ace Space arm and NA plinth. Excellent working order/condition. Cash on collection only. £2,500: **07505 583615 (Nottingham).**

CHORD COMPANY Clearway speaker cable 2x 9m ChordOhmic bananas, C-Digital 1m RCA both ends.AudioQuest Cinnamon USB-A-to-B 1.5m, Golden Gate 3.5mm jacks both ends 2m, Forest Optical 5m, RCA Noise Stoppers x10. All less than two years old and in excellent condition with light use, sensible offers. Email: **neil.teather@hotmail.com (Cleveland).**

EDWARDS AUDIO TT1 turntable in black with C100 cart. Purchased 2016, but rarely used, with all original packaging: £200 ono: **07854 178012 or email: cllrmsmith@hotmail.co.uk (Addlestone, Surrey).**

AURALIC Altair wireless streaming DAC/preamp. Silver, VGC, box, brochure and remote £800. Macintosh Super Audio CD/DAC 550 cost £8,500 for sale £4,000. VGC, box, brochure and remote: **07725 818438 or email: jonniejpc@msn.com (London).**

SONUS FABER Electa Amator speakers with dedicated wood/stone stands. Fabulous sound. Immaculate condition: £2,100: **07741 416584.**

AVI Neutron IV speakers, walnut, exceptional: £295. Linn Klassic music system, silver: £395. Roksan Kandy 3 integrated amplifier, stunning: £595. Collection and view: **07792 555551 (Dorset).**

THORENS TD125 MkII turntable, chassis only: £900. Linn Basik IVX tonearm: £150: **07988 081094**.

CELESTION F30 floorstanding speakers, 4 binding posts each, height 36in: £150. Buyer collects: **01761 568978 or email: stormknightuk@gmail.com**

PROAC Celef monitor speakers, one owner since 1972. Tear in front fabric. Includes stands. Offers, please. **07710 068949 or email: timfrere@gmail.com (Dorset).**

MITCHELL Gyro 'SE' turntable, Mitchell Tecnoarm 2 silver tonearm. World Audio WDPhono 3S phono stage, WDHD3S headphone amp, WDPre4 valve preamp, power supply, WDKT88 valve amp. Collection only: **0115 9754070 or 07531 288156 (Nottingham).**

CYRUS Stream Xa streamer/DAC. Owned from new with all original packaging. Serviced and upgraded by Cyrus. Excellent condition £495: **07950 068162 or email: cliffdartnall@mac.com (Kent).**

TOWNSHEND Maximum Supertweeters (1 x pair) matt black, 6 months old. VGC, like new, boxed, with instructions and Townshend Piggy back cables: £600.Will pay UK postage. **07940 192313 or 01242 695407 or email: roythrush60@googlemail.com (Cheltenham).**

NAIM Nait 1, front plate has a little wear, otherwise excellent condition £510 ono: **07833 626984.**

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REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

1 BARN TO BE WILD

If you fancy watching a gang of gnarly old geezers bash out an album, then you could do yourself a favour by looking up Barn on Youtube. The new documentary, directed by Daryl Hannah, shows her beau Neil Young and Crazy Horse working on their latest album, called *Barn*, in – you guessed it – a log barn.

A press release states: "It captures Neil and the Horse in an organic way, their easy irreverent humour, their brotherhood and their music, as it was created". *Barn* intentionally lingers on single shots for entire songs, showing there are no tricks, revealing the raw, organic and spontaneous process of the music bursting to life from unexpected moments. "Exquisite changes of light and weather dance in the remote meadow where the barn sits, adding a sweet, mystical magic as the music thumps, reverberates and echoes."

2 TIBET ON A WINNER

If you're inclined to splash out a little on one of those ever-more-frequent online virtual events,

you could do worse than investing in this year's Tibet House US Benefit Concert. It's the 35th such event and will go out via Mandolin on 3 March. Participants include Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson, Jason Isbell and Keanu Reeves, alongside Iggy Pop and Bernard Sumner. Philip Glass directs the whole shebang and you can get tickets from: boxoffice.mandolin.com.

3 GET AN EYEFUL!

Just out is *The Residents: A Sight For Sore Eyes, Vol. 1*, a visual history with rare and unseen photos, artwork, and other ephemera. Published by Melodic Virtue, it's a limited edition coffee table book covering everything from the mysterious band's beginnings in San Mateo up to *The Mole Show*. Featuring an introduction by Les Claypool (Primus) and exclusive quotes from Danny Elfman, Paul Reubens, 'Weird Al' Yankovic, Andy Partridge (XTC), Eric Drew Feldman (Captain Beefheart's Magic Band), Paul Leary (Butthole Surfers), Aaron Freeman (Ween), James McNew (Yo La Tengo), Zach Hill (Death Grips), Eric André, Cedric Bixler-Zavala (The Mars Volta), Dan Deacon and Don Preston (The Mothers of Invention), Alexander Hacke (Einstürzende Neubauten) and many more, it's limited to 1,500 copies, costs $75 and comes with a black vinyl 7in record of the unreleased *Not Available*-era track.

There's also a $200 deluxe edition, limited to 500 copies, signed by the band and author Aaron Tanner, which includes a Duck Stab/Buster & Glen notebook alongside the single.

To order your copy, go to: melodicvirtue.com

4 CATCH THE BUZ

Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips is partnering with music streaming and download platform Qobuz as its first official Artist-Approved Sound spokesperson. Coyne will be appearing in a number of video pieces to be released over the next six months and curating playlists for the company. Coyne

says: "It's always cool to be working with someone who cares about quality sound. Qobuz helps make the thick, complicated, nuanced arrangements and music come through better. Qobuz reminds me of listening to my favourite college radio DJs in the early Eighties, who really knew their music and cared about turning us on to it."

To celebrate, Qobuz is launching a new Duo offer, which provides access from the same subscription to two separate accounts. Available from £14.99 per month, £4.16 more than the individual

subscription, Duo gives two people under the same roof access to a catalogue of more than 70-million tracks available in high sound quality (hi-res and CD quality exclusively).

5 TAYLOR MADE

Record Store Day returns for its 15th anniversary on Saturday 23 April with Taylor Swift elected as RSD's first-ever global ambassador. Swift, who will release "special" RSD 2022 vinyl as part of the celebrations, says: "The places where we go to browse and explore and discover music new and old have always been sacred to me. Record stores are so important because they help to perpetuate and foster music loving as a passion. They create settings for live events. They employ people who adore music thoroughly and purely…

QOBUZ DUO GIVES ACCESS FROM ONE SUBSCRIPTION TO TWO ACCOUNTS

We need to support these small businesses more now than ever to make sure they can stay alive, stay eccentric, and stay individual."

Keep an eye out for more details on the 2022 RSD drop in future issues of *HFC*.

6 COUNTER PRODUCTIVE

Another Record Store Day initiative has been launched – Behind The Counter, a 12-part video series you can watch every Tuesday at 10am on Youtube in the build up to Record Store Day on 23 April.

Filmed in partnership with Classic Album Sundays and Bowers & Wilkins, the new series – the third BTC to be aired – visits: "some of the UK's best loved independent record shops, shining a light on the passionate and committed owners playing a vital role in bringing music fans together in their local communities." The press release continues: "Despite the pandemic continuing to impact the high street, Behind The Counter reveals how record stores have brought people together through a shared passion for music. A recent report from the Entertainment Retailers Association revealed physical album sales in the UK are at their highest level in over 20 years, making up 23 percent of all albums purchased in 2021. This unprecedented growth in the vinyl popularity is a testament to the commitment of independent record stores in championing the art of the physical album format."

This series of Behind The Counter visits Black Star Records in the New Forest, Intense Records in Essex, London's Lion Vibes, Loafers from Halifax, Peckham Soul in South London, Bradford's Record Café, Brighton's Resident, Some Great Reward in Glasgow, Vintage and Vinyl from Folkestone, Manchester's Vinyl Revival, Wax & Beans in Bury and London's World of Echo.

7 LOFTY AMBITIONS

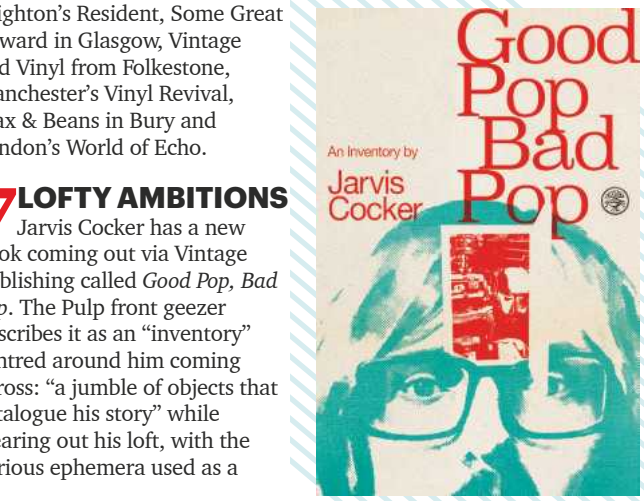
Jarvis Cocker has a new book coming out via Vintage Publishing called *Good Pop, Bad Pop*. The Pulp front geezer describes it as an "inventory" centred around him coming across: "a jumble of objects that catalogue his story" while clearing out his loft, with the various ephemera used as a jumping-off point to reflect on his life and career.

TAYLOR SWIFT HAS BECOME RSD'S FIRST GLOBAL AMBASSADOR

"From a Gold Star polycotton shirt to a pack of Wrigley's Extra, from his teenage attempts to write songs to the *Sexy Laughs Fantastic Dirty Joke Book*, this is the hard evidence of Jarvis' unique life, Pulp, 20th century pop culture, the good times and the mistakes he'd rather forget," reads a synopsis for the tome. "And this accumulated debris of a lifetime reveals his creative process – writing and musicianship, performance and ambition, style and stagecraft. This is not a life story. It's a loft story."

8 POGUE ALONE

Shane MacGowan of The Pogues is releasing his first-ever art book, *The Eternal Buzz And The Crock Of Gold* featuring sketches, paintings, self-portraits and playful character studies alongside handwritten lyrics, stories, photographs of Shane and his mates including Bob Dylan, Nick Cave, Pete Doherty and Kate Moss, plus abstract snippets dating back to MacGowan's childhood and through six decades. Curated by his wife and collaborator Victoria Mary Clarke, it includes a foreword by Johnny Depp who writes: "It's rare for a creative genius like Shane to have one avenue of output. Such an incendiary talent is likely to have a multitude of facilities whereby his talent might infiltrate the atmosphere and change the climate as we know it. And so, revealed here, is Shane's propensity for the wild, for the absurd, for the political, for the beautiful, all funnelled and threaded through the needle of his pen. But, this time, not via the tool of language. Instead, Shane's visual acuity will take the lead here. His visions will speak for themselves. Sometimes they will invoke wonder, sometimes they might appear decidedly threatening, but, regardless of medium, his work will always be full of poetry – a bit like the great man, and my great friend, himself." The book will be limited to just 1,000 copies and can be ordered from: store.shanemacgowan.com.



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